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Emancipated Missing Children Project

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Children go missing everyday in the United States and around the world. Most children will return home. However, there are children who will remain amongst the missing for years, if not forever. The Department of Justice's AMBER Alert Initiative, in partnership with the Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE) and Fox Valley Technical College (FVTC), is pleased to present this benchmark report which addresses questions regarding what happens to children who went missing and were still missing once they did or would have become adults.

This project came to fruition through Donna Uzzell's (FDLE Director of Criminal Justice Information Systems) vision and desire to provide research and findings that would strengthen and enhance law enforcement's efforts to rescue endangered missing children. Working closely with Ms. Uzzell was Larry Coffee. FDLE Missing Children Information Clearinghouse personnel Lee Condon, Donna Hodges, Melanie Laurella, Dinah Johnson, Gwen Johnson, and Dawn Mikola worked for months to develop leads and data to produce possible addresses for the emancipated missing children. Their information combined with the actions of the field investigators led to 79 persons being located.

FDLE Agents and Supervisors also assisting with the project include: Lissa Udell, Floy Turner, Kelly Rawson, Chris Bosworth, William Bullough, Susan Kuhn, Ryan Bliss, William Kulp, Duane Little, Stephen Miller, Scott Gibson, John King, Al Danna, Terry Thomas, Vinny Cassidy, Troy Roper, John McDonald, David Avallone, Brett Lycett, James Rivera, Cleve Boothman, Michael Roddy, and Gary Carmichael.

Other Police Departments and Sheriff's Offices who followed up on leads include: Laurenia Fahie – Ft. Lauderdale Police Department, Detective Edy Surman – Homestead Police Department, Sergeant Bill Weir – Broward Sheriff's office, Investigator Donna Gehr – Davie Police Department, Investigator Becky Slack – Plantation Police Department.

Jeremy Gordon, Government Analyst, FDLE Sexual Offender/Predator Unit collected and compiled the findings developed throughout the research project and provided graphical depictions and organized the information in a logical manner suitable to be used by policy makers. Project oversight and author of report is Lee Condon, FDLE Special Agent Supervisor. Assisting with writing and editing of the report is Colonel John C. Burlingame U.S. Army (retired).

The Department of Justice acknowledges the hard work and dedication of the law enforcement officers across the State of Florida who participated in this project. Their efforts led to locating many of Florida's missing emancipated persons.



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PREFACE

The following report summarizes the Emancipated Missing Child Project, funded by the Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, under the AMBER Alert Initiative. Operational research and project related work was conducted by the Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE) and supported by Fox Valley Technical College (FVTC). Searching for and recovering missing children requires cooperative efforts on the part of child protection agencies, law enforcement organizations, child advocates and others. This operational study provides valuable insight to those agencies and organizations charged with locating and recovering missing children, including how and where to go about searching for missing children, reviewing data bases of government agencies, policy implications and essential methods to determine the whereabouts of missing children. The operational research initiated in this project reinforces the use of the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) and off line searches. As a result of this study child protection professionals, law enforcement officers and others are now better prepared and informed in the effort to locate our country's most precious resource, our children.

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Executive Summary

The Department of Justice's AMBER Alert Initiative, the Florida Department of Law Enforcement and Fox Valley Technical College are pleased to present this benchmark report outlining the significant work in locating emancipated missing children in the State of Florida.

On behalf of children that go missing each day, local and state law enforcement completed this project in an effort to better understand the issues behind locating emancipated missing children and to identify key risk factors for children who disappear and what services or factors could prevent missing episodes in other children.

For the purpose of this project, an emancipated child is an individual who was reported missing at the time he or she was a juvenile and turned 18 during their missing episode. The project focused entirely on Florida missing children who reached the age of emancipation.

Each day, there are approximately 129 children reported missing in Florida. Last year 49,013 incidents of children missing from homes or shelters were reported to local law enforcement in Florida. Several factors influence the efforts and ability to locate these missing children. Specifically, when the missing child reaches the age of emancipation, a variety of factors work against keeping missing-child cases open including jurisdictional issues and individual agency policies.

Goals of the project include:

- Locate missing person and verify their well-being
- Determine what prohibited their rescue or recovery
- Identify risk factors
- Analyze trends related to missing children episodes
- Determine what strategies/tools could better assist law enforcement in the recovery of missing children

Initially, a National Crime Information Center (NCIC)/Florida Crime Information Center (FCIC) query revealed 454 active entries for persons who had been reported missing as children but had since reached the age of emancipation. After duplicate entries had been eliminated, 373 emancipated subjects remained.

As a result of the project, 173 leads were developed by Missing Children Information Clearinghouse (MCIC) analysts and sent to the jurisdiction where the missing person may have been residing or working. A total of 79 missing persons were recovered as a result of this project (approximately 21 percent of the total emancipated population). A large portion (44 percent) of the missing cases involved children over the age of sixteen. The vast majority of the emancipated cases had been active for two or more years. Located subjects tended to have been missing for shorter periods of time than the non-locates.

Most of the emancipated children, 94 percent, were categorized in the FCIC database as runaways. This group also represented the highest percentage of located children (99 percent). Surprisingly, 82 percent of the emancipated juveniles were located in the same county where they had been reported missing to law enforcement. Ten percent were located in another Florida county while only 8 percent were found outside the State of Florida.

Public record checks represented the most valuable tool in locating emancipated juveniles. In all, 71 percent of the addresses for located persons were found via a public records search. Florida driver's license queries yielded addresses for 66 percent of those located and credit checks were involved in 52 percent of cases. Employment and public assistance databases were also involved in a sizeable portion of confirmed hits.

Two-hundred fifty-seven (69 percent) of the total entries had errors in their NCIC/FCIC record including no social security numbers, wrong names, misspelled names, and/or wrong dates of birth. Entries for 44 percent of the emancipated children who were located contained errors. Over three-quarters of the entries for children who were not located had errors, possibly explaining why they remain missing. Due diligence at the time missing entries are created remains a vital step to successfully closing cases. Furthermore, although it is not required information, in those NCIC/FCIC entries that had the reporter's name and last known address, analysts were better able to develop leads resulting in locating missing persons.

Of the located persons, 49 percent (39) had some type of criminal justice contact during their missing episode. Eighteen-percent (52) of those emancipated persons who were not located had criminal justice contact subsequent to being reported missing and should have therefore been removed from NCIC/FCIC. Because their whereabouts are unknown, they will remain listed as missing. Of key importance is the fact that 63 percent of the subjects coming into contact with criminal justice officials during their missing episodes had verified errors in their NCIC/FCIC entry. Furthermore, one cannot ignore the fact that 91 of the 373 cases (24 percent) should have been cleared from the system, due to their contact with criminal justice, prior to the start of this project.

During the post-recovery interview with law enforcement 25 percent of the children (10) reported that they had been physically or sexually abused at home thereby resulting in the decision to run away. A sizeable portion of interviewees (68 percent) indicated that living conditions at home led to the decision to leave though physical or sexual abuse was not specifically cited as the primary reason. Given the fact that victims are known to minimize or deny victimization, and many persons were somewhat reluctant to be interviewed, the abuse disclosures may have been under reported.

Thirty-one of the interviewed children (76 percent) did not know they were considered missing by law enforcement. They were surprised to learn that they were considered to be missing children. Sixty-seven percent of the respondents who answered the question about school enrollment stated they were attending school during their missing episode. These findings highlight the importance of strong communication between law enforcement and school districts in the search for missing children.

Seventeen percent of the respondents reported they either returned home or let their parents know where they were residing. For one reason or another, the child remained categorized as missing. Periodic contact with the reporting parent may have resolved some of these incidents.

Another missing children issue is unidentified deceased persons. It was learned that in 84 percent of the cases in one jurisdiction, unidentified remains data were not being entered into NCIC by the law enforcement agency of jurisdiction, even though the data had been formally presented to law enforcement via a letter and NCIC data entry guide booklet. However, in this same jurisdiction, all of the unidentified remains were entered into the Florida Unidentified database.

- For a variety of reasons, there is evidence that there is not consistency in the handling of information concerning missing children. As indicated earlier, runaways make up the largest group of missing children, and the investigative efforts towards locating those children are dependent on agency resources and caseloads.
- Reporting is the key initial step when dealing with a missing child. After submission there must be consistent updating or quality control steps taken to ensure the NCIC/FCIC submission is accurate and complete.
- With allocated resources, training and analytical effort, a large number of children could be located and returned to responsible adult care, assuming appropriate reunification plans are in place.
- Realizing that many children admitted running from abusive environments, steps should be taken to ensure that the environment to which the child is being returned is healthy and positive. Reunification procedures should require trained professionals (law enforcement, child protection teams, child advocacy center personnel, child welfare caseworkers, etc.) to conduct an “environmental assessment” that includes the need for medical and/or psychological services for the child.

As we know, most missing children cases are runaway cases. According to this study, keeping contact with the reporting parent, public schools, and criminal justice would eliminate many of the open cases. Furthermore, attention to detail in the input phase of the report would eliminate many becoming missing emancipated children cases. Clearly, it is never too late to actively search for and locate missing children. However, recovering children is only the first phase of the recovery process. We must also be diligent in returning children to an appropriate environment that will cultivate success and stability.

Emancipated Missing Children Project

TRENDS AND OBSERVATIONS OF THE MISSING CHILDREN PROCESSING “SYSTEM” IN THE STATE OF FLORIDA

Who is considered an Emancipated Child?

For the purpose of this project, an emancipated child is an individual who was reported missing at the time he/she was a juvenile (under the age of 18) and turned 18 during their missing episode. The project focused entirely on Florida missing children who reached the age of emancipation.

Missing Children Who Emancipate

Each day there are approximately 129 children reported missing in Florida. Last year, 49,013 incidents of children missing from homes or shelters were reported to local law enforcement.¹ Efforts to locate missing children vary based on a variety of factors such as the circumstances surrounding the disappearance, the age of the child and the resources available at the local agency to further the investigation. Another factor that may be considered in the prioritization and allocation of resources of missing child cases is when the child reaches the age of emancipation. Historically, some agencies have been known to terminate investigative efforts based on the child turning 18 even when the child's whereabouts or welfare have yet to be determined or in cases of children in foster care, the case maybe closed because the reporting social service agency no longer had jurisdiction. The recently passed Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act prohibits' an agency from removing a child from the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) solely because the child emancipated. This research project looked at the emancipated missing cases for analysis and future recommendations. For the purposes of this research project, the Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE) looked at the number of Florida Crime Information Center (FCIC) entries showing those individuals reported missing as juveniles who emancipated and still remained active in FCIC as of September 19, 2005. The targeted population for the project was comprised of 373 emancipated children.

Emancipated Missing Children Project Justification

Currently no Florida studies or research projects exist that identify these emancipated persons with the goal of seeking information, to determine what transpired during their missing episodes until they reached adulthood. This information, through interviews of the subjects and analysis of both public and private records, would prove beneficial in identifying key risk factors for children who disappear and what services or factors could prevent missing episodes in other children.

¹ Federal Bureau of Investigation, National Crime Information Center

Project Goals

- Locate missing person and verify their well-being.
- Determine what prohibited their rescue or recovery.
- Identify risk factors.
- Analyze trends related to missing children episodes.
- Determine what strategies/tools could better assist law enforcement in the recovery of missing children.

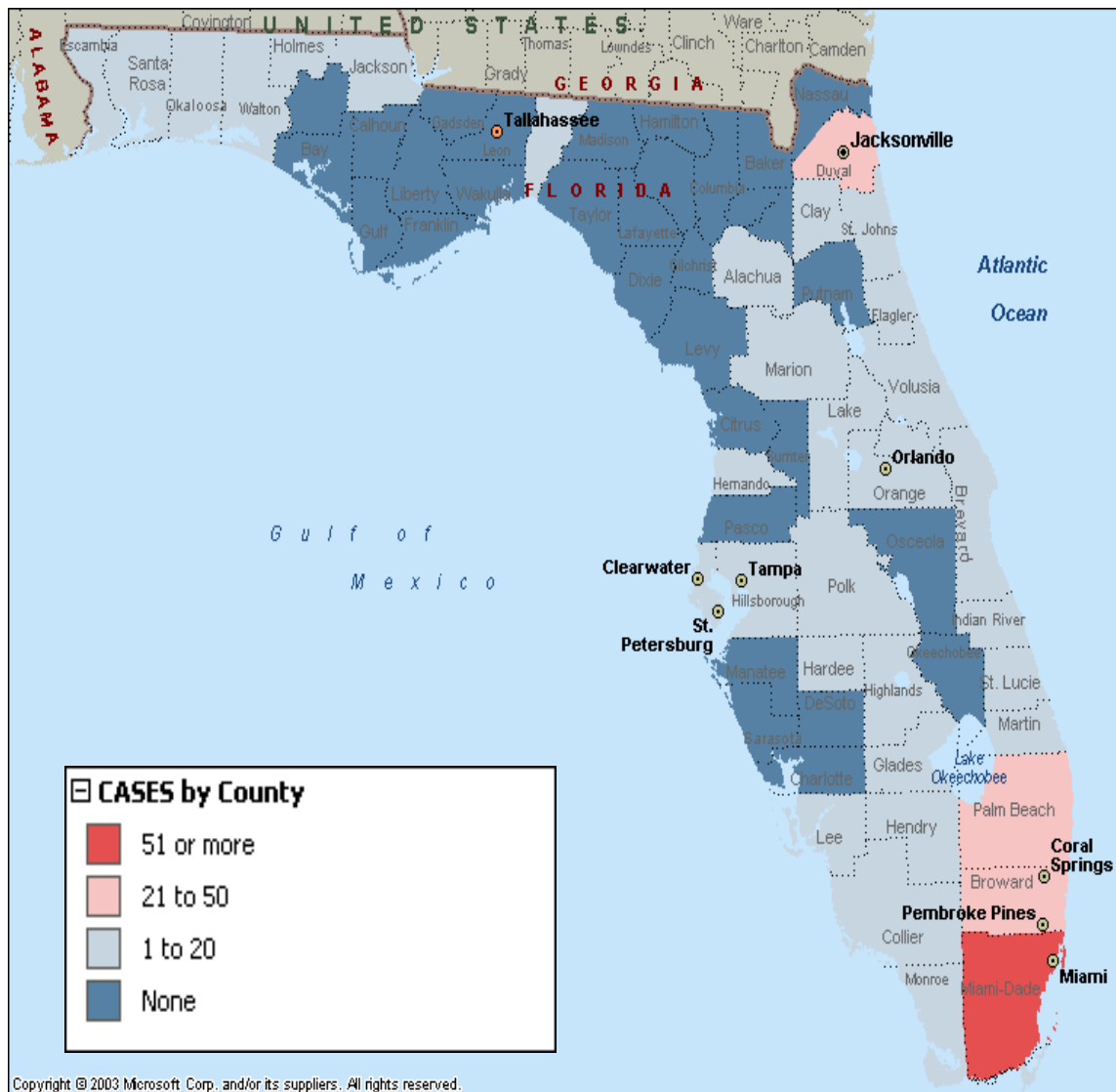
Project Methodology

On September 19, 2005 a NCIC/FCIC query revealed 454 active entries for persons who had been reported missing as children but had since reached the age of emancipation. The list was given to five analysts from the FDLE Missing Children Information Clearinghouse. These analysts were tasked with researching each case in an effort to develop leads that would provide possible locations of the emancipated subjects. In turn, these leads would be given to local law enforcement for follow-up.

During analysis it was discovered that some of the children had multiple entries in NCIC/FCIC. Though the project did not allow for further investigation into the reason for duplication, a couple of possible explanations exist. First, it is not unusual for a child to be reported missing by two separate parties for the same episode. For instance, a foster parent may report a child missing to law enforcement and the child's social welfare caseworker may also report the child as missing. Another possible scenario involves a missing child who is located but goes missing again shortly thereafter. In such circumstances, the second entry may be entered into NCIC/FCIC without the previous entry being removed.

Once the duplicate entries had been weeded out, 373 emancipated subjects remained. This group served as the target population of the Emancipated Missing Children Project. Initial analysis revealed that 60 different local law enforcement agencies had taken the missing child reports. The vast majority of cases, 224, originated from the south Florida area. Miami-Dade County contained the largest concentration of cases (152) accounting for approximately 41 percent of the total files analyzed.

Figure 1: Breakdown of Emancipated Cases by County



For each of the 373 target cases analysts were required to:

- Examine NCIC/FCIC entries to determine children who have become emancipated since the reported missing child entry.
- Query public and private databases to produce leads to locate emancipated children. Some of the databases included Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles, medical records, voter registration, public assistance records, law enforcement databases, Accurant, Department of Corrections, criminal history records, credit, wage, and hour records.
- Conduct telephone inquiries with local law enforcement agencies to determine if other records were available that would not necessarily appear in automated files.
- Request local law enforcement to visually verify the identity of the adult as that of the missing child and then remove the individual from NCIC.

- Develop a survey, to ascertain what transpired leading up to and during the subject’s missing episode. Have law enforcement administer instrument to located individuals.
- Request that law enforcement debrief located subjects to find out if they had been victimized, were sheltered by family or friends, engaged in dangerous activities, were coerced into using aliases, enrolled in school, or were arrested/detained by law enforcement during the missing episode. Collate information to analyze and identify trends as well as develop recommendations to enhance law enforcement’s efforts to recover missing children and remove the missing entries from NCIC.

All leads were sent to local law enforcement in the fall of 2005 however due to a variety of reasons, such as lack of investigative staff, other case priorities, and hurricane emergency response it was determined that FDLE would need to augment the local law enforcement effort. On January 19, 2006 FDLE Regional Operations Centers were asked to provide manpower to investigate and search for the emancipated subjects.

Project Results

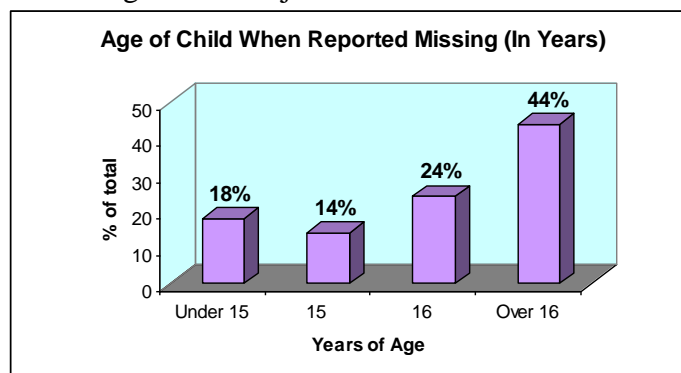
One hundred seventy-three (173) leads were developed by the MCIC analysts and sent to the jurisdiction where the missing person may have been residing or working. As of July 15, 2006 one hundred twelve (65 percent) of the leads sent to law enforcement had been pursued with the resulting information being provided back to FDLE.

A total of 79 missing persons were recovered as a result of this project, approximately 21 percent of the total emancipated population. Local law enforcement located 27 subjects (35 percent) and FDLE located 52 subjects (65 percent). FDLE received post recovery interview surveys for 41 of the 79 recovered persons (52 percent).

Emancipated Juveniles

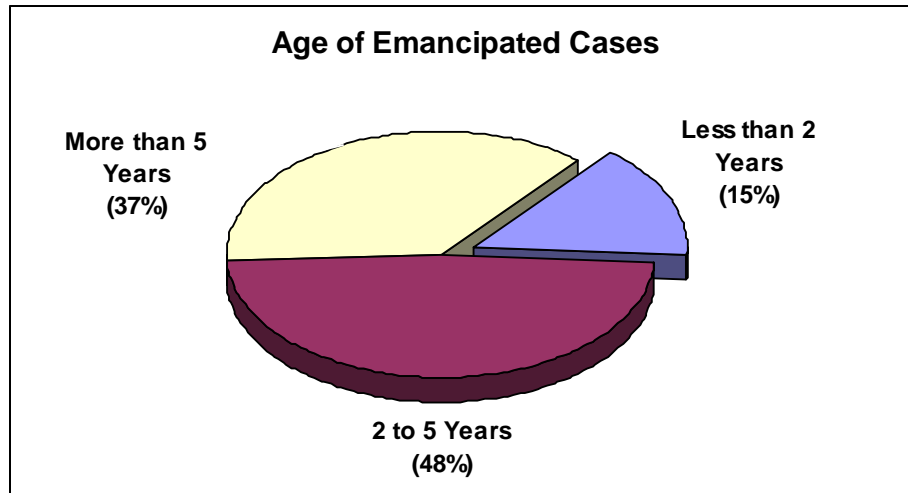
Just over two-thirds (69 percent) of the emancipated juveniles were female. Males represented an even smaller proportion of located persons. Only 17 out of the 79 (21 percent) subject’s contacted through the course of this project were male.

A large portion (44 percent) of the missing cases involved children over the age of sixteen. In fact, only 18 percent involved missing juveniles under the age of fifteen. No significant difference was observed between the age when reported missing of located juveniles and non-locates.

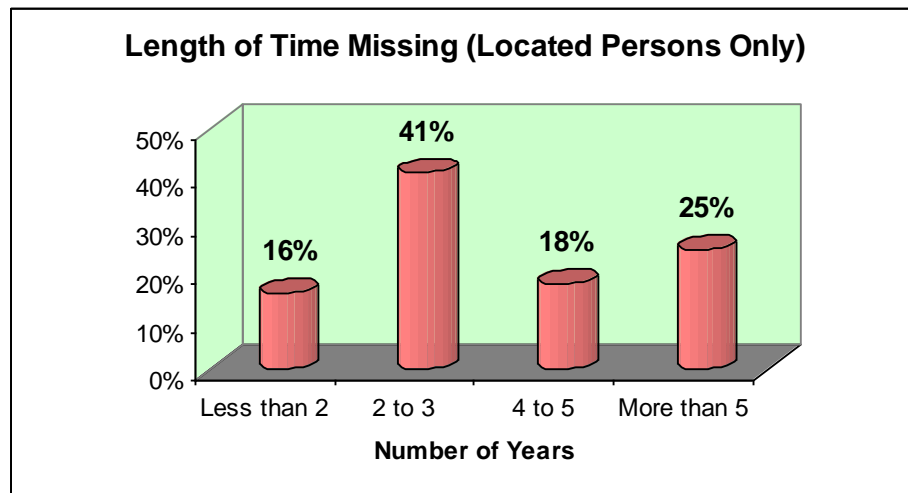


Age of Missing Cases

The vast majority of the emancipated cases had been active for two or more years. Forty-eight percent of the subject's analyzed had been missing for two to five years, while 37 percent had been missing for more than five.

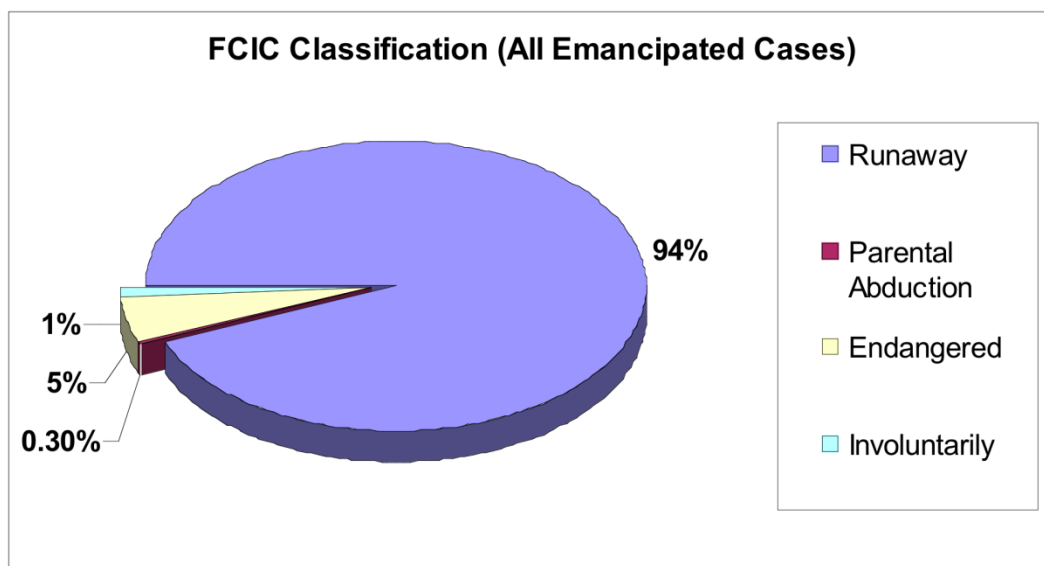


Located subjects tended to have been missing for shorter periods of time than the non-locates. Length of time missing averaged 4.3 years for located juveniles whereas the cases unable to be closed had been active an average of 5.9 years. Despite the tendency for shorter time periods 25 percent of the located subjects had been listed in NCIC for more than five years. Clearly, it is never too late to actively search for and locate missing children, especially those classified as runaways.



Case Classification

Most of the emancipated children, 94 percent, were categorized in the Florida Crime Information Center (FCIC) database as runaways. This group also represented the highest percentage of located children (99 percent).

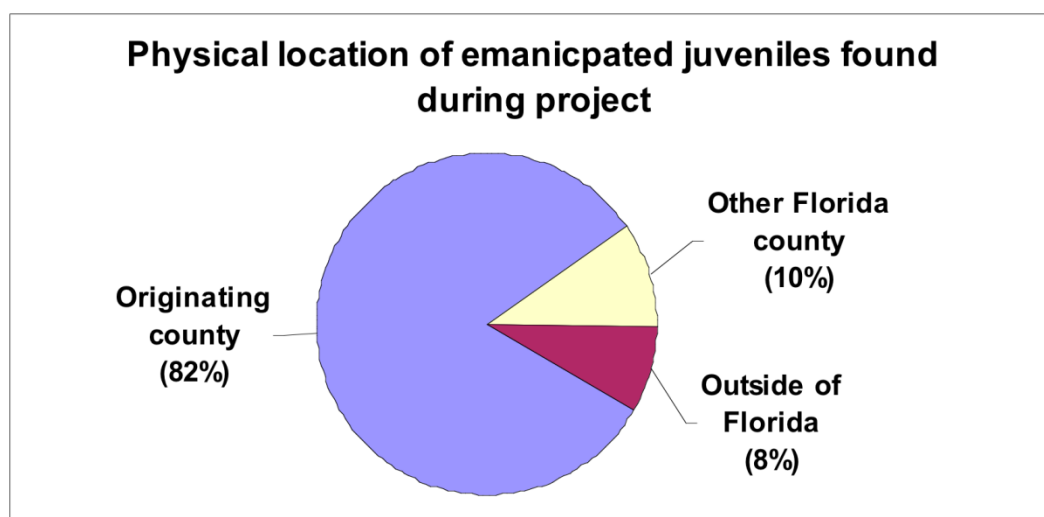


Numeric Breakdown (Total Cases):

- Runaway: 350
- Parental Abduction: 1
- Endangered: 19
- Involuntarily: 3

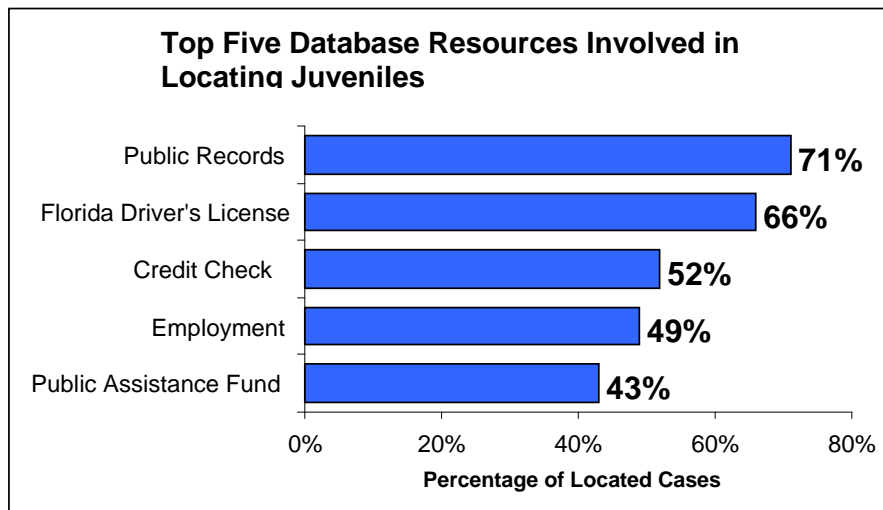
Where were the emancipated children located?

Eighty-two percent of the emancipated juveniles were located in the same county where they had been reported missing to law enforcement. Ten percent were located in another Florida county while 8 percent were found outside the State of Florida.



Database Leads

Analysts utilized a variety of public and private databases to identify possible leads. Public databases include but are not limited to Choice Point, Accurant and Internet search engines. Though all proved useful for locating at least one person, a few stood out as key information sources. Public record checks represented the most valuable tool in locating emancipated juveniles. In all, 71 percent of the addresses for located persons were found via a public records search. Florida driver's license queries yielded addresses for two thirds of those located (66 percent) and credit checks were involved in 52 percent of cases. Employment and public assistance databases were also involved in a sizeable portion of confirmed hits.



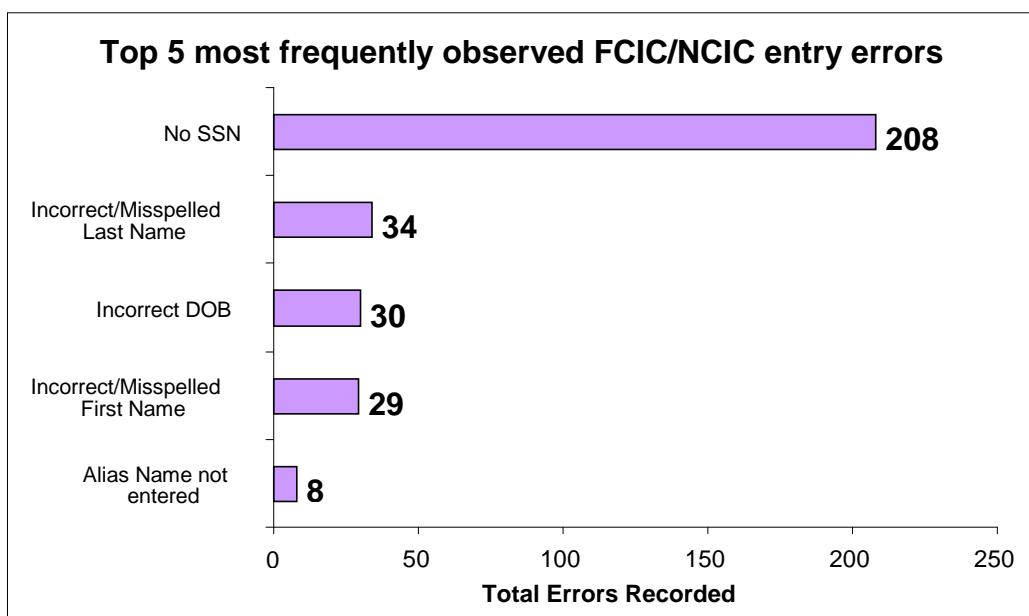
One hundred thirty-two of the emancipated juveniles researched here (35 percent) displayed some form of activity with the Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles (DHSMV) after their missing episode had begun. Updates included obtaining new driver's licenses (DL) or identification cards (ID), updating existing records, vehicle registrations, and traffic tickets. The average age of the individual at the time of update was eighteen. In all, 69 percent of the updates occurred by the time the person reached the age of emancipation, with 94 percent occurring by the time they had reached their 21st birthday.

When updates did occur they happened relatively shortly after the child was reported missing. Thirty-five percent of the DHSMV activity occurred less than a year after the date of the NCIC entry. An astounding 80 percent of the activity was observed within just two years of the start of the missing episode. In fact, twenty-eight percent of the entire emancipated group (106 subjects) displayed DHSMV activity in two years or less.

DHSMV activity post missing was recorded for 68 of the individuals not located as a result of this project (23 percent). The information had unfortunately gone stale by the time it was identified.

NCIC/FCIC Entries

Two hundred and fifty-seven (69 percent) of the total entries had errors in their NCIC/FCIC record including no social security numbers, wrong names, misspelled names, and/or wrong dates of birth. Forty-four percent of the emancipated children who were located had errors in their entry. Over three-quarters of the children who were not located (76 percent) had errors, possibly explaining why they remain missing. Of the errors recorded, “no social security number” was the most frequently observed with 201 specific instances. Due to the lack of this identifier, several other potential errors and aliases were unable to be verified. In addition, the likelihood of obtaining a hit on a queried subject drops significantly if the name and/or date of birth are incorrect on the flag and there is no social security number to match upon. For instance, NCIC allows for latitude in the year of birth but will not return results if the month and day are even slightly off. Due diligence at the time missing entries are created remains a vital step to successfully closing cases.



Only 13 percent of the 373 emancipated children had dental records entered into NCIC. This is significantly low considering that 85 percent of the cases had been active for more than 2 years.

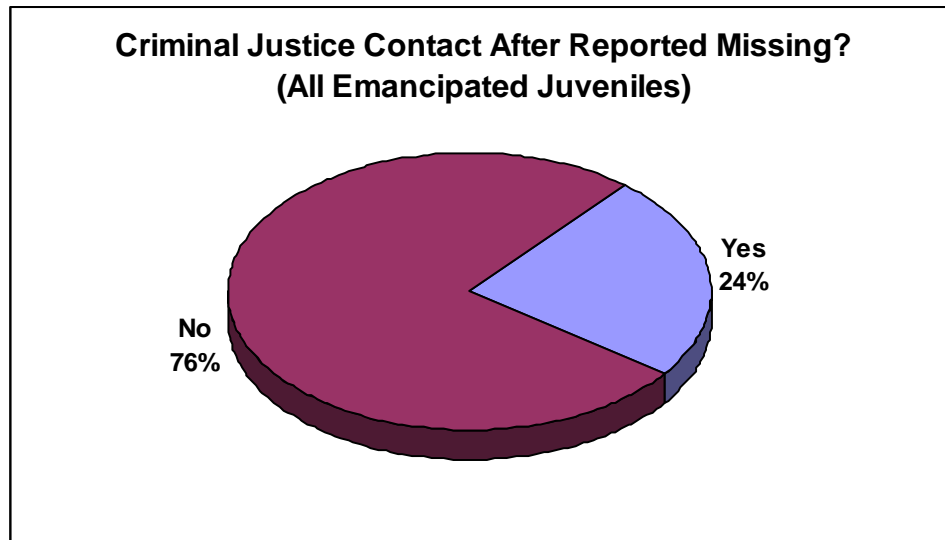
Although not required information, in those NCIC/FCIC entries that had the reporter’s name and last known address analysts were better able to develop leads resulting in locating missing persons.

Criminal Justice Contact

Forty-nine percent of the located persons (39) had some type of criminal justice contact during their missing episode. Eighteen children were arrested and 17 received traffic citations, yet their missing entry remained active in NCIC/FCIC. Eighteen percent (52) of those emancipated persons who were not located had criminal justice contact subsequent to being reported missing and should have therefore been removed from NCIC/FCIC. These 52 individuals will remain listed as missing because their current whereabouts are unknown. Of key importance is the fact that 63 percent of the subjects coming into contact with criminal justice officials during their missing episodes had verified errors in their NCIC/FCIC entry. As such, queries conducted may have produced false negatives. Once again it can be

seen that proper data entry at the beginning of the missing episode may very well determine whether a child is ever “located” and removed from the system. Of course, accuracy of data is only effective if queries are actually conducted.

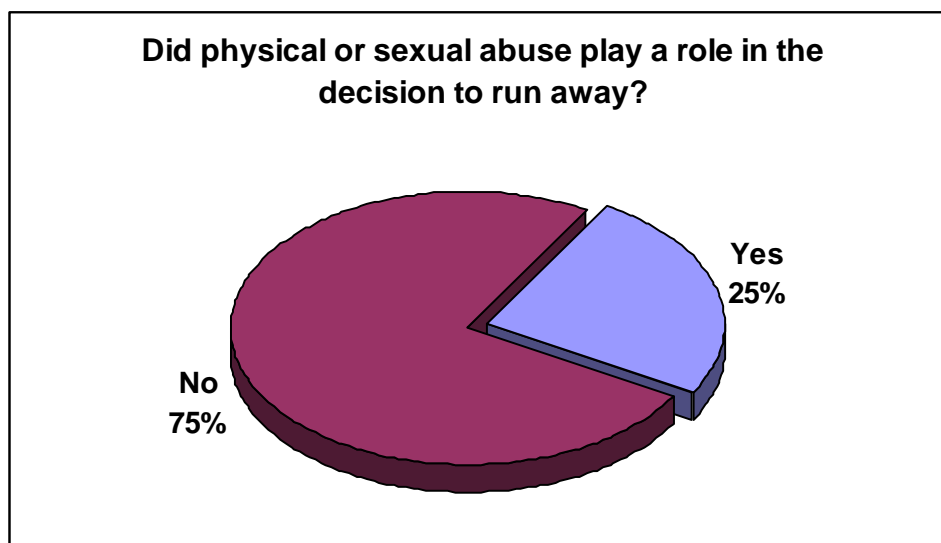
For persons coming into contact with the criminal justice system, 78 percent did so within 2 years of being reported missing. Almost half of the reported contact (47 percent) occurred in less than 12 months. Irrespective of the exact time of contact, one cannot ignore the fact that 91 of the 373 cases (24 percent) should have been cleared from the system prior to the start of this project.



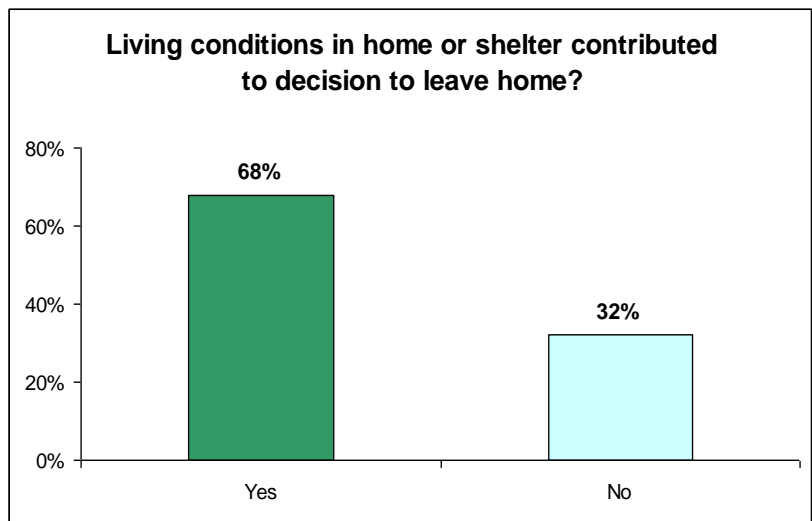
What did the post-recovery interview tell us?

Abuse Prior to Running Away

During the post-recovery interview with law enforcement 25 percent of the children (10) reported that they had been physically or sexually abused at home thereby resulting in the decision to run away. Two respondents reported leaving due to sexual abuse only, six left as a result of physical abuse, and two cited both physical and sexual abuse as the primary reason for running away from home.



A sizeable portion of interviewees (68 percent) indicated that living conditions at home led to the decision to leave though physical or sexual abuse was not specifically cited as the primary reason. Several of the subjects in the post-recovery interview denied having been abused at home yet seemed to withdraw when the topic of sex or physical abuse was brought up by the law enforcement officer. One child denied sexual abuse to the interviewing law enforcement officer, yet her juvenile records indicated she was repeatedly sexually abused as a child. Another child stated that she left home because her mother provided an unsafe and unfit environment.



Given the fact that victims are known to minimize or deny victimization, and many persons were somewhat reluctant to be interviewed, the abuse disclosures may have been under reported.

One example of a respondent who advised she was abused is a female who ran away from home at the age of 17 after her step-father punched her in the face following an act of lewd and lascivious behavior against the child. She reported the abuse to her mother, but there was no police investigation. This subject has been living on the streets since her missing episode began over two years ago and is still without a permanent residence today.

Abuse During Missing Episode

Only one respondent proved willing to disclose sexual abuse that occurred during her missing episode. Another child, a female, stated that she lived with older men and traded sex for food and shelter, though did not consider what the men had done to her a crime. Yet another case involved a child living with an adult male 30 years her senior who ultimately fathered her baby. As with the reporting of abuse prior to the episode, it is strongly suspected that there was underreporting of abuse that may have occurred during the episode.

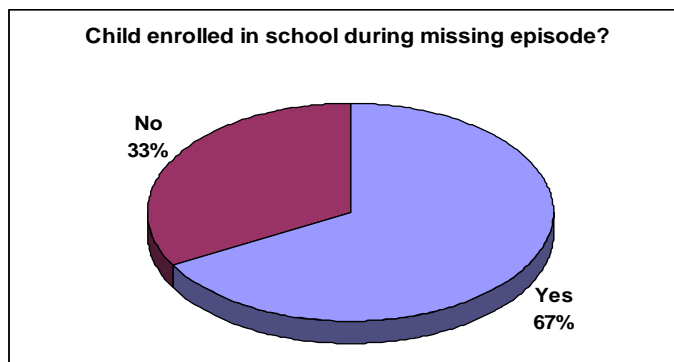
Who Knew They Were Missing?

Thirty-one of the interviewed children (76 percent) did not know they were considered missing by law enforcement. These individuals were surprised to learn that they were considered to be missing children. Some knew they had been reported missing but thought the police investigation had been cancelled once they returned home or called home to let their parents know they were living with friends. One child was abused by his father and told to leave the home. The father reported him missing to law enforcement

immediately after ejecting his son from the home. The child was surprised to learn his father had reported him missing to law enforcement.

Enrolled and Attending School

Sixty-seven percent of the respondents who answered the question about school enrollment stated they were attending school during their missing episode. These findings highlight the importance of strong communication between law enforcement and school districts in the search for missing children.



Home Contacts

Seventeen percent of the respondents reported they either returned home or let their parents know where they were residing. For one reason or another, the child remained categorized as missing. Perhaps the parents did not know to contact law enforcement when their child returned home or they became aware of where the child was staying. Periodic contact with the reporting parent may have resolved some of these incidents.

Unidentified Deceased Persons

Concurrent to this grant project, FDLE worked with the Medical Examiner's Commission to review investigations of unidentified remains. The purpose of the review was to determine if investigative tools were being fully utilized to identify the remains of unidentified persons brought to morgues throughout the state. Interestingly, it was learned that in 84 percent of the cases in one jurisdiction, unidentified remains data were not being entered into NCIC by the law enforcement agency of jurisdiction, even though the data had been formally presented to law enforcement via a letter and NCIC data entry guide booklet. However, in this same jurisdiction, all of the unidentified remains were entered into the Florida Unidentified database.² Medical examiners are dependent on law enforcement to enter data into NCIC and FCIC. Children who went missing and were murdered during their missing episode would be among the population of unidentified remains if their original NCIC entry was incorrect or lacking key identifiers such as dental records and DNA.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- For what is potentially a variety of reasons, there is evidence that there is not consistency in the handling of information concerning missing children. As indicated earlier, runaways make up the largest group of missing children, and the investigative efforts towards locating those children

² A database used by Medical Examiner Officers to directly input unidentified remains information into the system.

are dependent on agency resources and caseloads. As evidenced in some of the disclosures of those children identified in this project, runaways are subject to abuse and other victimization during their episode. Sixty-eight percent of the children interviewed in the current study left their homes due to the abusive environment to which they were exposed and 25 percent identified sexual abuse as the root cause of their departure. Children missing from foster care are often at greater risk, as they may already be victims and more vulnerable to the dangers exposed to them during the episode. They also lack a searching parent. These statistics beg law enforcement intervention to actively locate these children and to determine the actual situation the child experienced. Not fully investigating these categories of missing children prevents these abuses from ever receiving competent criminal justice intervention.

- Reporting is the key initial step when dealing with a missing child. After the initial information is submitted there must be consistent updating or quality control steps taken to ensure the NCIC/FCIC submission is accurate and complete.
- Eighty-two percent of the missing emancipated children, when found, were in the same county which received the initial report. Additionally, 67 percent of those missing were enrolled in school. These statistics dictate that with allocated resources, training and analytical effort, a large number of children could be located and returned to responsible adult care, assuming appropriate reunification plans are in place.
- Realizing that many children admitted running from abusive environments, steps should be taken to ensure that the environment to which the child is being returned is healthy and positive. Reunification procedures should require trained professionals (law enforcement, child protection teams, child advocacy center personnel, child welfare caseworkers, etc.) to conduct an “environmental assessment” that includes the need for medical and/or psychological services for the child.

Post-Recovery Interview Anecdotal Findings

As indicated previously, children go missing for a variety of reasons. Their rescue or recovery may be directly dependent on law enforcement’s actions. Once a missing child is located it is incumbent upon law enforcement to interview the child to determine if the child was a victim of physical or sexual abuse. The law enforcement officers who conducted the interviews with located emancipated children expressed concern with the number of runaways who had been sexually or physically battered prior to their decision to run away or escape the abuse. Included in this section are some of the accounts from the emancipated children who were located by law enforcement. In other instances children left home for a very short period of time or their whereabouts were known but remained active in NCIC/FCIC for years.

Following is a look at some of the notable accounts of what transpired according to the located emancipated children. To protect the children’s identities they will be referred to by their gender.

- Female was sexually molested by a family member from the age of three until the age of 14. When she was 14 her mother was permanently injured in a car accident and has been in a nursing home to this date. She was placed in foster group homes. She ran from the group home nine years ago and was arrested several times during her missing episode. She was located on June 1, 2006.

- Female left home three years ago after physical and sexual abuse were reported to law enforcement but never acted upon. The abuse continued ultimately forcing the female to flee from home to escape the repeated attacks. She had asked that her identity and location not be revealed in fear of additional retaliation by the abuser and her family. She appeared visibly shaken and worried that because FDLE had located her, her family would now be able to do the same. Law enforcement investigating the sexual and physical abuse reportedly advised her that it was her word against the offender's. She was located in May 2006.
- Female went to live with her older sister after her mother lost custody when she hit the female in the head with a stick. The female left the sister's house when she was sexually assaulted by her sister's friend in March 2005. Assaults were reported to the Department of Children and Families (DCF). She was located on May 31, 2006.
- Female was missing for 18 years after she ran away from her foster mother who beat her with an electrical cord. She reported the physical abuse to school authorities, DCF, and local law enforcement when school staff found her sleeping in the hallways where she had apparently been staying while on the run. The foster mother was also the female's step-mother. She was placed in another foster home and reunited with her step-mother years later. She did not know she was considered missing by law enforcement. Other children were also removed from the step-mother's home which doubled as a day-care center. The female was reported missing August 28, 1988 and located on May 22, 2006.
- Female stated she left home in June 2000 to get away from the domestic violence between her father and mother. Her father grabbed her by her throat and picked her up on one occasion and was physically abusive toward her. She resided with friends for a while and then returned home. She was placed in a foster home where she ran away from foster care but continued to attend high school.
- Female was reported missing by her parents on January 24, 2002 after she left home to be with her boyfriend, the father of her child. In 2004 she returned home to her parents. She was located on May 30, 2006.
- Female ran away from home after an argument with her mother on December 19, 2001 but returned home after living with a friend for only three days. She knew a missing child report was filed with law enforcement but thought it had been closed out upon her return home. She was located on May 23, 2006.
- Female left home on July 10, 2003 to be with her boyfriend but after a couple of days returned home to her grandmother's house, at which time she learned the police had initiated an investigation. She did not consider herself as missing or a runaway. She thought the investigation had been closed once she returned home.
- Female was reported missing on February 24, 2004 after leaving home due to "household conflicts." Her current residence was listed in several databases some indicating she had been there since leaving home. She was located on March 3, 2006 in the same city from which she was reported missing.

- Male left home on January 5, 2004 for several months after conflicts in the home. He lived with a friend and attended school. He returned home not knowing he was considered missing by law enforcement. He was located on May 25, 2006.
- Female ran from home after an argument with her parents on April 26, 2000. She stayed with a friend for one week and then returned home. She had a driver's license, vehicle, and other public records listed to the address where she was residing. She was located on May 24, 2006.
- Female was reported missing in 1998 after skipping middle school for a day. She, her boyfriend, and another friend went to the mall and a local park. They returned to their respective homes in the evening. She did not know she was considered missing until she was located on May 24, 2006.
- Male ran away from his foster home on November 18, 2004 after a conflict with the foster parents. He lived with a friend for several months and during this time he also attended school. He was reported missing by his caseworker. He emancipated three months after his caseworker reported him missing. He was located on May 24, 2006.
- Female child was reported missing in 1998. On May 24, 2006 FDLE agents went to her parents' home in attempts to locate the emancipated child. Her parents were uncooperative and refused to provide any information regarding their daughter but the mother agreed to give the agent's contact information to their daughter. In a phone interview with her, it was learned that she had runaway for a period of five days and was unaware that she was considered missing by law enforcement. She was located through her out-of-state driver's license.
- Female child was reported missing by her mother on October 27, 2004 when she ran away to live with her boyfriend in another county. However, the child called her mother shortly after leaving home and told her where she was. Child and her boyfriend have been living at the same address since October 2004. Emancipated child believed her mother notified law enforcement and school personnel as to her whereabouts. She was located on February 14, 2006.
- Female child ran from home due to conflicts with her parents and physical abuse by her father. She tried to report the abuse, but was prevented in doing so by her father. She lived with friends and continued to stay enrolled in school until she turned 18. She had several non-custodial contacts with law enforcement but was never notified by the officers that she was listed as a missing juvenile. Although she denied being a victim of sexual abuse, there are other reports to the contrary on record with social services. She was located on February 13, 2006.
- Male child was reported missing on March 2, 2004 by his father, who had just kicked him out of the house. Father drank excessively, used illegal drugs, and was verbally abusive and neglectful toward him. He would force him to sleep in a trailer, with no running water, located in rear of house. He was located through public and private databases that showed his current address where he lives with his stepmother. He was located February 23, 2006.
- Twenty-one years ago a female child was reported missing on July 1, 1985. She never considered herself missing as she had voluntarily left to live with a girlfriend and her family with the mother's permission. She attended school the entire time. She works for a certified public accounting firm and was easily located through public and private databases including a driver's

license. She was entered incorrectly in NCIC with the wrong DOB. She was located on May 19, 2006.

- Female was reported missing on December 31, 2002 after she ran away from a non-secure shelter to be with her family for the holidays. Subsequent arguments with her family caused her to return to the shelter on the next day. She was entered into NCIC with her first name spelled incorrectly. She was located on May 24, 2006.

Recommendations

The accounts included above provide opportunities to improve the process of locating emancipated missing children. The following recommendations are suggested:

- Initial reports should be immediately entered into NCIC, and the entry should be reviewed for accuracy and updated with information when it becomes available. Procedures should designate who is responsible in not only ensuring that the information entered matches the child but that the information obtained is updated with all available information such as scars, marks or tattoos, dental records, social security number, jewelry, etc.
- Investigations should provide a checklist for validating the missing child entry, which should include database checks, driver's license checks, follow up with home and relatives, and school checks.
- Agency policies for responding to and investigating missing children episodes should mirror the "Law Enforcement Policy and Procedures for Reports of Missing and Abducted Children Policy" developed by the US Department of Justice and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.³
- Agency policies should include reunification procedures that provide for the recovered person to be interviewed by a trained forensic interviewer and follow up should occur on any reported criminal activity or abuse. Reunification policies and procedures should ensure that the child is returned to a safe environment and that the child receives the necessary intervention if the child has been traumatized prior to or during the missing episode or during the law enforcement recovery of the child.
- Agency policies should require notification to the child's school when a child is missing and follow up to develop leads to locate the child with school personnel and school resource officers.
- Agency policies should require investigative personnel contact the reporting parent or guardian at regular intervals until the child is located. Parents should also be instructed to contact law enforcement when the child returns home, or when the parent has new information that may lead to his or her recovery, or when the parent changes residence.
- Unidentified remains data of children (and adults) should be entered into NCIC Unidentified Remains file. This data is compared to the data entered for missing children and can be a valuable law enforcement tool to determine if the child is deceased and can also provide leads in the subsequent homicide investigation of the child.

³ Located at http://www.ncmec.org/en_US/documents/ModelChild.pdf