

INVESTIGATIVE CHECKLIST FOR LAW ENFORCEMENT WHEN HELPING UNSUPERVISED AND RUNAWAY CHILDREN



This Checklist provides an investigative framework for officers when coming in contact with unsupervised and/or runaway children¹ while on patrol. This information is offered to enhance the officer's ability to make educated decisions when helping to safeguard unsupervised and/or runaway children. Officers are encouraged to rely on the laws in their jurisdiction as well as their intuition and experience when making decisions regarding the best interest of the child and community.

Field Interview: Initial Phase

The initial phase of the field interview should be conducted in a manner so as to establish the child's statements, which will form the basis in assessing the child's level of risk.

- Conduct a field interview. If the child is in the company of other people, **separate** everyone before conducting the field interview(s).
- Obtain identifying information, such as name and address, and descriptors such as height, weight, and age. Remember the child may be reluctant to provide the information or may provide incorrect information.
- Query information obtained through the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) National Crime Information Center's (NCIC) database and the state/territorial law-enforcement system counterpart. If a record is located, determine the child's status, such as missing or a charged offense, and determine whether grounds exist to immediately place the child in protective custody and transport the child for proper investigative follow-up, placement, or disposition. If no record is located, proceed with the field interview.
- Develop a timeline of the child's **whereabouts** and **activities** by asking
 - Who have you associated with while on the street?
 - What is your relationship with this/these individual(s)?
 - Where have you stayed?
 - With whom have you stayed?
 - How long have you stayed with them?
 - How long have you spent time on the street, and what have you done while on the street?
- Ask the child, in a **direct** manner, if he or she is missing, he or she is a runaway, or it is **possible** someone may be looking for him or her. Focus on deviations in behavior, both verbal and non-verbal, exhibited by the child during this initial interview phase. Keep in mind the child may be deceptive or fail to disclose information due to concerns such as fear, intimidation, or threats of reprisal.
 - If the child indicates **yes**, consider placing him or her in protective custody and transporting him or her for proper investigative follow-up, placement, or disposition.
 - If the child indicates **no**, proceed with the second phase of the field interview.

Field Interview: Second Phase

An **in-depth** interview of the child should be conducted based on information obtained during the initial phase of the field interview in order to further **assess the child's level of risk** if allowed to remain unsupervised. Continue to look for discrepancies in information obtained in the initial phase of the field interview with information obtained during the second phase of the interview.

- Obtain **detailed** information about the child including
 - Full name.
 - Nickname(s).
 - Full physical description to include clothing, body piercings, tattoos, and any personal items such as a backpack and wireless device. **Note:** NCIC online searches should be conducted on personal items.
 - Date of birth/age. **Note:** Children 13 years old or younger do not have the survival skills necessary to protect themselves from exploitation on the streets.
 - Place of birth.
 - Addresses, both current and prior.
 - Home phone number.
 - Cell phone number.
 - Last time the child was **seen** at home.
 - Name of school attending or has attended.
 - Date last attended school.
 - Employment information, if the child is employed, including name, address, and phone number of the employer.
- Obtain full name, address, and home/business phone number(s) of last person/people to **see** the child at
 - Home.
 - School.

¹In this Checklist the term "child" is used to refer to anyone younger than the age of 18 or the legal age of majority.

- Ask the child if he or she is under the care of a doctor. If so obtain the doctor's name, address, and phone number.
- Determine if the child is taking any prescription medication and/or other drugs, ranging from over-the-counter medications to illegal substances, and if he or she is in possession of any. Note any drug dependencies putting the child at risk.
- Ask the child if he or she has been involved in or the victim of any crimes since leaving home. Potential risk factors and/or indicators of trafficking and exploitation include
 - History of emotional, sexual, or other physical abuse.
 - Signs of current physical abuse and/or sexually transmitted diseases.
 - History of running away or current status as a runaway.
 - Appearance of expensive gifts, clothing, or other costly items with no valid explanation of their source.
 - Presence of an older boy-/girlfriend.
 - Drug addiction.
 - Withdrawal or lack of interest in previous activities.
 - Gang involvement.
- Ask the child for information about family members, both immediate and extended, including name, address, home/business phone number(s), and place(s) of employment.
- Determine the relationship(s) the child has with the identified family members.
- Identify and explore any dysfunctional relationships between family member(s) and the child. Keep in mind the child may have left home due to mental, physical, or sexual abuse or exploitation at the hands of a family member or individual otherwise known to the child.
- Ask the child to provide names, addresses, and phone numbers of friends who live or lived nearby and those with whom he or she attends or attended school.
- Identify and determine if the child is out of his or her zone of safety based on the child's age, the child's level of maturity, and environment in which the child is found. If so consider placing the child in protective custody and transporting the child for proper investigative follow-up, placement, or disposition.

Field Interview: Final Phase

Additional information must be obtained, based on the initial and secondary information gathered, in order to make a determination about allowing the child to remain unsupervised or placing the child in protective custody.

- Ask communications to check for any prior contact or calls for service with the child or child's family members
- Check with surrounding jurisdictions for prior contact with the child and the child's family members
- Check with the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children® (NCMEC) at 1-800-THE-LOST® (1-800-843-5678) for previous intake or new intake of information regarding reports of missing and/or sexually exploited children
- Check with the appropriate state/territorial missing-child (person) clearinghouse(s) for any prior contact with the child or the child's family members
- Check with the National Runaway Switchboard at 1-800-RUNAWAY (1-800-786-2929)
- Contact the National Human Trafficking Resource Center (NHTRC) at 1-888-373-7888 for assistance in cases of trafficking
- Query NCIC utilizing non-unique identifiers
- Check with social services for prior contact with the child or the child's family members
- Check with homeless shelters for any prior contact with the child
- Check with the person/people the child identified as the last one(s) to see him or her at home
- Check with the person/people the child identified as the last one(s) to see him or her at school
- Check with the child's family members to obtain additional information about the child
- Check with the child's friends to obtain additional information about the child
- Check with the child's school to obtain additional information about the child
- Check with the child's place of employment, if employed, to obtain additional information about the child

This Checklist should be used in conjunction with NCMEC's *Investigative Checklist for First Responders and Missing-Child, Emergency-Response, Quick-Reference Guide for Families* to help ensure a thorough investigation. These Checklists may be viewed, downloaded, and ordered from the "More Publications" section of NCMEC's website at www.missingkids.com.

This project was supported by Grant No. 2011-MC-CX-K001 awarded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. This document is provided for informational purposes only and does not constitute legal advice or professional opinion on specific facts. Information provided in this document may not remain current or accurate, so recipients should use this document only as a starting point for their own independent research and analysis. If legal advice or other expert assistance is required, the services of a competent professional should be sought. Points of view or opinions in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice. Copyright © 2011 National Center for Missing & Exploited Children. All rights reserved. National Center for Missing & Exploited Children® and 1-800-THE-LOST® are registered trademarks of the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children. NCMEC Order #03.