

Missing foster children are often gone for over a month, report says

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Children who go missing from foster care in the United States are typically gone for more than a month before being found, according to a new federal report highlighting the vulnerabilities of a group whose disappearances rarely make headlines.

Those who disappeared while in foster care were unaccounted for on average 34 days, an analysis of data from 45 state agencies found. But the report released Monday from the Department of Health and Human Services' inspector general noted that in nine states, missing foster children were gone for more than 50 days on average, raising their chances of substance use, HIV infection, sex trafficking or involvement with the justice system.

"If they're not in a situation where they're being monitored and they have proper guidance, anything can literally happen," Dan Bittner, an assistant regional inspector general for HHS and one of the report's authors, said in an interview. "And it does happen."

The Administration for Children and Families, an HHS department that oversees the nation's foster-care system, said in a statement Monday that insights from the report "will help inform our efforts to provide technical assistance to states and tribes to improve performance."

But the report's findings come with significant caveats, largely due to the uneven quality of data across and within states, according to Mark E. Courtney, a University of Chicago social work professor whose research includes studies of policies and services for youths transitioning to adulthood from foster care.

The report shows that a significant number of young people in foster care who are reported missing are adolescents and young adults over 18 who live in states where they can remain in foster care until 21 — groups Courtney said are known to end up reported missing not because they were abducted but because they were "absent without leave."

“The fact our data systems have not adapted to not being clear that they’re missing because they’re really refusing service” is a problem, he added.

While most missing foster children’s stories never become public, some attract attention after their cases end in tragedy. Rilya Wilson, then 4 years old, went missing in 2001 and was gone for 15 months before officials not. She was never found. In 2020, 16-year-old Anaiah Walker was found dead in the middle of an Arizona highway officials say she ran away from her group homes and became a victim of sex trafficking.

Many children who go missing from foster care do so several times, the report found. Between July 2018 and December 2020, state agencies recorded more than 110,000 episodes of missing kids involving roughly 44,000 of the more than 1 million children in foster care during the course of the study. In five states — Nevada, Illinois, New York, Florida and Connecticut — children who went missing did so an average of five to seven times.

But the lack of uniformity across states makes it impossible to make meaningful comparisons among states, Courtney said. In states such as Illinois, missing children are reported almost immediately, meaning the state tallies a missing-child case even if that child returns that day. Other states have waiting periods for filing reports, and states vary as to how long they keep missing cases open, Casey said.

“Nobody should read this report and say, ‘Ah, this state has more youths on the run than another state’ and try to make meaning of that. That’s the takeaway,” he said.

Teenagers are much more likely than younger children to go missing, according to the report. Nearly two-thirds of the recorded missing-children episodes involved kids ages 15 to 17, while just 2 percent of the incidents were for those 11 or younger.

Those numbers track with what experts who study older children in foster care have long known, Casey said. But more important, the figure speaks to a shortcoming of the foster-care system that the numbers don’t explicitly capture: Teenagers are “voting with their feet” and voluntarily leaving foster-care situations that don’t meet their needs.

“A teen girl who wants to spend time with her boyfriend, or has a family member in the hospital and needs to be gone for a couple days and the social worker or judge doesn’t acknowledge or allow that? That child is going to be considered a ‘runaway,’ ” Courtney said.

In his own survey with teens and young adults in foster care, Courtney said most of them reject the label of “runaway” because it doesn’t reflect their situation or motivation. The lack of evidence-based placement options and service options for adolescents frustrates many and leads them to leave a group home or foster family regardless of whether the departure has been approved.

Most children included in the report were found, but about 6,600 were still missing at the end of the study. Of those, more than 2,700 were in California. But Bittner said that state relies on counties to run their own foster-care programs, which makes him question the communication among agencies and the accuracy of the number of children still missing in California.

California is not the only jurisdiction to not fully administer its foster-care program at the state level. Ten other states fully or partly delegate their programs to individual counties, the report says. This kind of disjointed system, Bittner said, raises questions about the coordination between counties when a child goes missing and whether state agencies are appropriately allocating resources to find children.

“Having decentralized information makes it hard to gauge how big the issue is,” he said.

Courtney, the University of Chicago professor, said disparities in state policies and data collection at least partly explain California’s outsize number of missing foster cases. Arizona dropped missing foster-child cases from its rolls after six months, and California keeps its missing children cases active until a child is at least 18.

In 12 states, children who went missing from foster care died. One 15-year-old who went missing in California in January 2019 was found dead of a suspected drug overdose in Texas three days later, the report says. California officials told the report’s authors that they believed a man accompanying the child gave them lethal drugs.

The inspector general’s report does not include information about how the children went missing — for example, by abduction or by running away — race, ethnicity or type of placement setting. The authors wrote that some of the data provided by state agencies was incomplete, inaccurate or not comparable between states, making it impossible to do a full analysis.

State agencies reported that their most common challenges in making sure children are reported missing promptly and then finding them include getting cooperation from the children’s families and friends, obtaining help from police and finding a foster-care placement for children that will discourage them from running away.

While the inspector general’s report makes no recommendations, the authors said they would follow up with the Administration for Children and Families about any policy changes it makes in response. Bittner said he hopes the agency will evaluate why certain states appear to have worse outcomes for missing kids.

“I don’t think we want these children to get lost in the foster-care system,” he said, “and literally lost in the eyes of the general public.”