Examining missingness among children in out-of-home care placement in Nebraska

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A B S T R A C T

Background: Little is known regarding the prevalence and context of missingness (i.e., being reported as a missing person) among children in out-of-home (OOH) care.
Objective: The present research examines the relationship between missingness and OOH care placements as well as predictors and case contexts of children missing from OOH care.
Methods: Point-in-time count data of reported missing persons in Nebraska and administrative records on children's OOH placements are used. Bivariate significance tests examine group differences; case contexts are explored through content analysis of OOH case reviews.
Results: About 30 % of Nebraska's missing children are in OOH care. Bivariate tests show that children missing from OOH care are older and are more likely to be Black and less likely to have their race listed as "unknown" than children missing from their families of origin. Children in OOH who are missing are also more likely to be in group care, on probation, and have greater placement instability compared to children in OOH care who are not missing. Case contexts of missingness include unmet substance use and mental health challenges, experiences with violence and victimization, and few bonds to school.
Conclusions: Screening and interventions for high-need children in OOH care and their caregivers are necessary to prevent children from going missing from placements.

1. Introduction

While prior research has explored running away from foster care (e.g., Branscum & Richards, 2022; Lin, 2012), little is known regarding the prevalence and context of missingness (i.e., being reported as a missing person) among children in out-of-home (OOH) care placements. In fact, although the problem of missing persons has gained national attention – especially regarding missing Native American and African American persons (e.g., Richards et al., 2021) – the term missing is rarely used to describe children who are not present at their OOH placements. Instead, prior research, as well as state and administrative departments and data systems, often classify these children as runaways (Lacey, 2019). Whether classified as runaways or missing persons, children who are not present at their OOH placement are at greater risk for criminal or sexual victimization, drug or alcohol abuse, criminal activity, and human trafficking, among other risks (Bowden & Lambie, 2015; Clark et al., 2008; Gambon et al., 2020; Latzman et al., 2019). Using data from

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a point-in-time count of reported missing persons and administrative records on children's OOH placements, the present research examines the relationship between missingness and OOH care placements. In addition, for children who were in OOH care placements, individual- and case-level factors are assessed to explore the predictors of missingness and the case contexts of children missing from OOH care.

2. Predictors of running away from OOH care placements

Prior research has established that a portion of children in OOH care are not present in their placements at any given time, (e.g., have run away); however, estimates regarding the prevalence of running away among children in foster care vary widely from less than 2 % (Branscum & Richards, 2022; Lin, 2012) to 71 % (Biehal & Wade, 1999) across different samples and jurisdictions. Studies have identified a range of individual risk factors thought to increase the likelihood a child will run away from placement, including the child's age, gender, race, substance use, and mental health history, among others. Regarding age, studies suggest that teenagers (those age 13 and older) are more likely to run from care than younger children (Branscum & Richards, 2022; Courtney et al., 2005; Courtney & Zinn, 2009; Dworsky et al., 2018). In addition, research suggests that children who are removed from their home at an older age are more likely to run than those who are younger at first removal. For example, Lin (2012) found that children who run from placement are on average 5 years older at their first removal than those who do not run.

Females are significantly more likely to run than males (Branscum & Richards, 2022; Dworsky, Wulczyn, & Huang, 2018; English & English, 1999; Fasulo et al., 2002; Kim et al., 2015; Sunseri, 2003). Studies have also shown that children of color are also more likely to run from their placements (Branscum & Richards, 2022); however, studies have been inconsistent regarding whether children from a particular racial or ethnic group are more likely to run away. For example, Wulczyn (2020) found that African American and Hispanic children are more likely to run from placement than their White peers. Similarly, Lin (2012) found that African American girls are most likely to run. In contrast, Nesmith (2006) found that American Indian children had twice the odds of running away as White children.

Prior studies have also suggested that children with substance use disorders are more likely to run away from foster care than those without substance use disorders (Branscum & Richards, 2022; Courtney et al., 2005). Likewise, mental health diagnoses have been associated with running away from foster care (Clark et al., 2008; Courtney et al., 2005; Courtney & Zinn, 2009; Kim et al., 2015). Further, Lin (2012) found that foster children who ran away from their placements had higher rates of disabilities (including mental health disabilities) than foster children who did not run away (but see Branscum & Richards, 2022).

In addition to individual-level risks, several placement-level factors associated with running away from a foster care placement have been identified. For example, children in group placements are more likely to run away from care than those in family placements (Courtney et al., 2005; Witherup et al., 2008), as are children placed with a non-relative as compared to those placed with a relative (Courtney et al., 2005). Placement instability has also been linked to running away: children with 2 placements or fewer are less likely to run from care compared to children with more than 2 placements (Children's Bureau U.S., 2018); higher numbers of separations from home are also related to an increased likelihood of running from placement (Branscum & Richards, 2022; Clark et al., 2008; Courtney et al., 2005). Finally, case plan goal may be connected to running from a foster care placement. Kim et al. (2015) found that children whose long-term care plans included foster care and/or whose case plan goal was not reunification were more likely to run than those with plans for shorter stays in foster care, family reunification, or adoption.

3. Why children run from OOH care

There are myriad reasons a child might run from a foster care placement, and studies tend to agree that running is a coping behavior for children in care (Lin, 2012). Collectively, scholars note that children run away because they are either *running to* or *running from* someone or something (Courtney et al., 2005; Crosland et al., 2018; Crosland & Dunlap, 2015). For example, Courtney et al. (2005) examined administrative data for over 14,000 children who ran from care over the course of 10 years between 1993 and 2003 and interviewed 42 children who had run away from foster care and then returned. Running behavior was organized into four broad categories: (1) running to family of origin, (2) returning to friends and the streets, (3) touching base and maintaining relationships, and (4) running at random.

Similarly, a review by Crosland et al. (2018) classified the reasons children reported running from their foster placements using this dichotomy; though they used the terms *access* (i.e., running to) and *avoidance* (i.e., running from). They found that children ran to positive social supports such as family and friends and ran from negative social interactions, such as those with foster care placement staff and peers that left them feeling unloved or unvalued. The desire for "normalcy" was another key reason children ran away. In interviews, children reported running to friends, parties, and extracurricular activities that made them feel normal (i.e., activities that a child not in OOH care would experience).

Although prior research has explored the risk factors and context for running away from foster care, the present research aims to shed light on the prevalence and context of *missingness* among children in OOH care placements. On January 20, 2020, a point-in-time count of missing persons in Nebraska was conducted and uncovered that two-thirds of Nebraska's reported missing persons were children (i.e., in Nebraska, minors aged 18 years or younger) (see Richards et al., 2021; Sutter et al., 2020). Using data from this point-in-time count of reported missing persons and administrative records on children's OOH care placements from the Nebraska Foster Care Review Office, the present research examines the relationship between missingness and OOH care placements among children who had been reported missing in Nebraska. Then, among children who were in OOH care placements, individual and case-level factors were assessed to explore predictors and contexts of missingness. The following research questions guided the analyses:

RQ1: Among children who had been reported missing, what was the prevalence and context(s) of children who were in OOH care placements compared to children who were not in OOH care placements?

RQ2: Among children who were in OOH care placements, who is missing from the OOH care placements (i.e., what individual- and case-level factors predict missingness among children in out-of- home care)?

RQ3: What is the context(s) of children missing from OOH care placements?

4. Methods

4.1. Data and sample

Data were drawn from two distinct sources (1) a point-in-time count of persons officially reported missing in the state of Nebraska on January 20, 2020, and (2) administrative records from the Nebraska Foster Care Review Office (FCRO) for children described as in an OOH placement or having just been in an OOH care placement and nearing permanency completion on January 20, 2020. Data for the point-in-time count of officially reported missing persons was collected from three publicly available data sources: (1) the Nebraska Missing Persons List (NMPL), (2) the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs), and (3) the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children's (NCMEC) missing persons list. On the day of the point-in-time count, January 20, 2020, the NMPL database was accessed and the list of all persons missing from Nebraska on that date and their associated case information were recorded in a SPSS database. These data were then cross-checked against the national lists from NamUs and NCMEC and any additional persons missing from Nebraska that were not reflected on the NMPL were added to the dataset. Data collection was conducted by three Ph.D. level graduate assistants (see Richards et al., 2021 for a full description of the study design and methods).

The list of names of missing children identified in the point-in-time count of officially reported missing persons was then cross-checked with the administrative records from the FCRO. The FCRO is an independent state agency responsible for the oversight of the permanency, safety, and well-being of all children in OOH care in Nebraska. The FCRO defines OOH as "… 24-hour substitute care for children placed away from their parents or guardians and for whom a state agency has placement and care responsibility" (FCRO, 2021, p. 4). This term includes OOH placements due to child abuse or neglect as well as delinquency status.

The FCRO's role is to independently track children in OOH care, collect and analyze data related to these children, and make recommendations on conditions and outcomes, including any needed corrective actions. The FCRO is statutorily mandated to maintain an independent tracking system of all children in an OOH placement in the state. The tracking system is used to provide information about the number of children entering and leaving care as well as other data regarding children's needs and trends in OOH placements, including data collected as part of the FCRO case file review process.

During each FCRO case file review, an FCRO staff person (System Oversight Specialist) facilitates the monthly meeting of 4–10 specially trained community members from a variety of disciplines (local board). The board determines each reviewed child's needs based on the summary document provided by the System Oversight Specialist that contains information from the files of agency(s) involved in the child's case (i.e., DHHS, Probation, or both) along with any input received from the parties to the child's case, other research, and the system's actions to date. From this analysis, the board makes recommendations for next steps for the child's case. The System Oversight Specialist formalizes the review findings and recommendations with rationale into a document that is then shared with the legal parties on the child's case, including the Court.

The first FCRO case file review after children's removal from the home is usually scheduled to occur at approximately 6 months post-removal. Children are then re-reviewed about every 6 months for as long as they remain in OOH care. Whenever possible FCRO reviews are scheduled to occur so that the formal review document is received by the court and legal parties in time to be considered and acted upon before the child's next court hearing.

A Ph.D. level graduate student research assistant was embedded at the FCRO to serve as a data intern for this special project on missingness among children who had been in OOH placements in Nebraska. The data intern worked closely with FCRO staff to develop the deidentified project dataset and to clean and analyze these data. The study design was reviewed by the University of Nebraska Institutional Review Board and deemed a program evaluation, not human subjects research.

4.2. Measures

4.2.1. Officially reported missing persons data

For each case, the *first and last name*, *age at missing*, *sex* (0 = male, 1 = female), *race* (Uniform Crime Report [UCR] racial categories: 1 = White, 2 = Black, 3 = American Indian/Alaska Native, 4 = Asian or Pacific Islander, or 5 = Unknown), and *date of missingness* was recorded. *Years missing* was calculated by subtracting the date the child went missing from the date of data collection (i.e., January 20, 2020).

4.2.2. Foster care review office data

Cases were de-identified using a unique *FCRO ID number*. For each case the following demographic data was collected, *age* was calculated by subtracting the date of birth from the date of data collection (i.e., January 20, 2020), *sex* (0 = male, 1 = female), *race* (FCRO racial categories: 1 = White, Non-Hispanic; 2 = Black, Non-Hispanic; 3 = American Indian or Alaska Native, Non-Hispanic; 4 = Asian/Native Hawaiian, Non-Hispanic; 5 = Hispanic; 6 = Multiracial, Non-Hispanic; 7 = Other Race, Non-Hispanic; and 8 = Unknown Race) and *date of missingness*.

Times in care (*lifetime*) included the number of care episodes over the child's lifetime, *number of placements* (*lifetime*) included the

number of placements over the child's lifetime, and *days in current placement* indicates the number of days the child had been in the placement type they were assigned on January 20, 2020. *Placement at point in time* (*PIT*) indicates the type of placement the child was assigned on January 20, 2020 (see Appendix for PIT definitions) (1 = foster home, relative or kinship; 2 = foster home, non-relative; 3 = group home; 4 = institution (i.e., medical hospital, psychiatric facility, etc.); 5 = supervised independent living; 6 = trial home visit; 7 = detention facility; 8 = near permanency placement (i.e., adoptive home approved/licensed). *Agency involvement* comprised the state agency or agencies responsible for supervising the child's OOH placement as of January 20, 2020 (1 = Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services/Child and Family Services, 2 = Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services/Child and Family Services and Probation, 3 = Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services/Office of Juvenile Services and Probation, 4 = Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services/Office of Juvenile Services, and 5 = Probation Only. *Reviewed* indicated whether the child had a FCRO review within 6 months of January 20, 2020 (0 = no, 1 = yes).

4.3. Analytic plan

Analysis proceeded over several phases. To begin, the population of children who had been officially reported missing as of January 20, 2020, was compared with FCRO administrative records on January 20, 2020, to identify which children were in an OOH care placement when they were reported missing. Next, the population of children who were in OOH care placements on January 20, 2020, was examined and children who appeared in the population of officially reported missing persons were compared to children who did not appear in the population of officially reported missing persons. Then, the subsample of children who (1) had been officially reported missing from their OOH placements and (2) had a review from the FCRO was compared with the subsample of children who had been officially reported missing from their OOH placements but had not had a review from the FCRO. For each of these analyses, descriptive statistics and bivariate means tests were estimated to identify significant differences between groups. Alpha was set at $p <$ .05 for all quantitative analyses.

Finally, qualitative data from the case files for missing children in OOH care who had a FCRO review were examined to provide insight into the case contexts related to missingness. A doctoral level research assistant read each narrative review and coded the narrative regarding any situational factors related to running away (e.g., substance use, experiences with violence). Coding was guided by prior research regarding why children run from care (e.g., Courtney et al., 2005; Crosland et al., 2018; Crosland & Dunlap, 2015). Case contexts were not mutually exclusive: each identified factor for each case was coded, and thus, multiple factors could be associated with a child's case. The prevalence of each theme was calculated as a total frequency and percentage (see Table 4) and narrative examples of different contexts were included using pseudonyms.

5. Results

Regarding the population of children (i.e., minors, ages 18 years or younger) who had been officially reported missing in Nebraska as of January 20, 2020, the majority were male (52.00 %) and White (55.38 %) (see Table 1). Nearly one third was Black (28.08 %), while approximately 7 % were American Indian/Alaska Native or listed as an "unknown race", respectively. Missing children ranged in age from 3 to 18 years old and were 15.89 years old on average (SD = 1.85). They had been missing from 0 to 15 years and 0.52 years on average.

The first research question concerned the relationship between missingness and OOH care among children in Nebraska. To address

Table 1

Descriptives for sample of officially reported missing children on 1/20/2020 and comparisons across children in out-of-home placements versus children not in out-of-home placements (*N* = 381).

	Total sample $N = 381$		Children in out-of-home placements $n = 114$		Children not in out-of-home placements $n = 267$		t/x^2 test
	N	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	
Sex							$x^2 (1) = 0.003$ $p = .956$
Female	183	48.00	55	48.25	128	47.94	
Male	198	52.00	59	51.75	139	52.06	
Age at missing	*M* = 15.89; *SD* = 1.85 Range = 3–18 years		*M* = 16.01; *SD* = 1.30 Range = 12–18 years		*M* = 15.84; *SD* = 2.04 Range = 3–18 years		$t (322.447) = -1.045$ $p = .148$
Race							$x^2 (4) = 12.484$ $p = .014$
White	211	55.38	56	49.12	155	58.05	
Black	107	28.08	43	37.72	64	23.97	
Asian	4	1.05	0	–	4	1.50	
American Indian/Alaska Native	30	7.87	11	9.65	19	7.12	
"Unknown race"	29	7.61	4	3.51	25	9.36	
Years missing	*M* = 0.52 *SD* = 1.56 Range = 0–15 years		*M* = 0.16; *SD* = 0.43 Range = 0–2 years		*M* = 0.67; *SD* = 1.82 Range = 0–15 years		$t (327.355) = 4.320$ $p < .001$

research question one, we crosschecked our population of missing children with data from the FCRO. Results indicated that nearly 30 % of children who had been officially reported missing as of January 20, 2020, were in an OOH care placement. Children missing from OOH care placements were statistically similar to children who were missing from their families of origin regarding age and sex; however, children who were missing from OOH care placements were statistically different from children who were missing from their families of origin regarding race and years missing. Specifically, children who were missing from OOH care placements were more likely to be Black whereas children who were missing from their family of origin were more likely to be listed as an "unknown" race. In addition, children who were missing from OOH placements were missing for significantly less time than children who were missing from their family of origin, an average of 0.16 years compared to 0.67 years, t (327.355) = 4.320, $p < .001$.

Research question two was concerned with the individual- and case-level factors predictive of being reported missing among all children in OOH care. To address this research question, we examined the FCRO records for all children who were in OOH care placements on January 20, 2020 ($N = 4103$) and compared children who had been officially reported missing ($n = 114$) with children who had not been officially reported missing ($n = 3989$) (see Table 2). Results showed no significant differences regarding sex across children who had and had not been officially reported as missing. Conversely, findings indicated that children who had been officially

Table 2
Descriptives for FCRO sample and bivariate comparisons between children who were missing from out-of-home placement and children who were not missing from out-of-home placement ($N = 4103$).

Variable	Total sample $N = 4103$		Missing from placement $n = 114$		Not missing from placement $n = 3989$		t/x^2 test
	N	%	n	%	n	%	
Sex							x^2 (2) = 0.404 $p = .817$
Female	1927	46.97	56	49.12	1871	49.60	
Male	2169	52.86	58	50.88	2111	52.92	
Age at PIT count	$M = 10.17$; $SD = 5.91$ Range = 0–19 years		$M = 16.76$; $SD = 1.31$ Range = 12–19 years		$M = 9.98$; $SD = 5.89$ Range = 0–19 years		t (277.834) = −43.958 $p < .001$
Race							x^2 (6) = 22.730 $p < .001$
Hispanic	817	19.91	24	21.05	793	19.88	
White, not Hispanic	1876	45.72	38	33.33	1838	46.08	
Black, not Hispanic	799	19.47	36	31.58	763	19.13	
American Indian/Alaska Native, not Hispanic	183	4.46	9	7.89	174	4.36	
Asian, Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander, not Hispanic	37	0.90	0	–	37	0.93	
Other race or unknown, not Hispanic	46	1.12	3	2.63	43	1.08	
Multiracial, not Hispanic	345	8.41	4	3.51	341	8.55	
Number of times in care, lifetime	$M = 1.52$; Median = 1.00 $SD = 0.98$; Range = 1–12		$M = 2.59$; Median = 2.00 $SD = 1.66$; Range = 1–8		$M = 1.49$; Median = 1.00 $SD = 0.94$; Range = 1–12		t (115.094) = −7.022 $p < .001$
Number of out-of-home placements, lifetime	$M = 4.10$; Median = 2.00 $SD = 4.97$; Range = 1–62		$M = 8.89$; Median = 7.00 $SD = 7.65$; Range = 1–37		$M = 3.96$; Median = 2.00 $SD = 4.81$; Range = 1–62		t (115.564) = −6.850 $p < .001$
Days in placement at PIT or last placement before missing	$M = 199.49$; Median = 134.00 $SD = 208.45$; Range = 4–2287		$M = 103.52$; Median = 59.00 $SD = 134.96$; Range = 5–919		$M = 202.23$; Median = 138.00 $SD = 209.53$; Range = 4–2287		t (129.087) = 7.553 $p < .01$
Placement at PIT or last placement before missing							x^2 (7) = 105.426 $p < .001$
Foster home (relative or fictive/kinship)	1575	38.39	14	12.28	1564	39.13	
Foster home (non-relative)	1156	28.17	32	28.07	1124	28.18	
Group home	236	5.75	19	16.67	217	5.44	
Institution	249	6.07	16	14.04	233	5.84	
Supervised independent living	43	1.05	3	2.63	40	1.00	
Trial home visit	389	9.48	1	0.88	388	9.73	
Detention facility	245	5.97	9	7.89	236	5.92	
Near permanency placement	210	5.12	20[a]	17.54	190	4.76	
Agency involvement at PIT							x^2 (5) = 244.286 $p < .001$
NDHHS/CFS only	3279	79.92	30	26.32	3249	81.45	
NDHHS/CFS and probation	149	3.63	16	14.04	133	3.33	
NDHHS, OJS, and probation	111	2.71	2	1.75	109	2.73	
NDHHS and OJS only	8	0.19	1	0.88	7	0.18	
Probation only	555	13.53	65	57.02	490	12.28	

reported missing were significantly older on average than children who had not been officially reported missing, 16.76 years old compared to 9.98 years old, t (277.834) $= -43.958$, $p < .001$. In addition, a statistically greater percentage of Black children were officially reported missing compared to not officially reported as missing, while a statistically lower percentage of White children were officially reported missing compared to not officially reported as missing, $x^2(6) = 22.730$, $p < .001$. Regarding placement stability, children who had been officially reported missing had greater numbers of episodes in care during their lifetime on average (2.59 versus 1.49), t (115.094) $= -7.022$, $p < .001$, and greater numbers of placements during their lifetime on average (8.89 versus 3.96), t (115.564) $= -6.850$, $p < .001$, compared to children who had not been officially reported missing. Further, children who had been officially reported missing had been in their current placement significantly fewer days than children who had not been officially reported missing, a median of 59 days compared to 138 days, t (129.087) $= 7.553$, $p < .001$.

Placement type was further explored by examining children's placement type on January 20, 2020, or among children was missing from care, their most recent placement type before going missing from care. Significant differences regarding placement type across children who had and had not been officially reported missing were identified, $x^2(7) = 105.246$, $p < .001$. Significantly greater percentages of children who were officially reported missing were in group homes, institutions, independent living placements, detention facilities, and near permanency placements, while significantly greater percentages of children who had not been officially reported missing were in relative/kinship foster home placements and trial home visits. Of note, of the 20 children who had been reported missing from a near permanency placement, all 20 had been returned home to their family of origin. Finally, there were significant differences regarding the types of agency supervision among children who had and had not been officially reported missing, $x^2(5) = 244.286$, $p < .001$; significantly greater percentages of children who had been officially reported missing were under the supervision of Probation, while significantly lower percentages were under the supervision of Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services/Child and Family Services only.

Table 3
Descriptives for sample of missing children in out-of-home placements who had a FCRO review versus missing children in out-of-home placements who did not have a FCRO review ($n = 114$).

	Reviewed ($n = 53$)		Not reviewed ($n = 61$)		t/x^2 test
	n	%	n	%	
Sex					x^2 (1) = 2.218 $p = .136$
Male	23	43.40	35	57.38	
Female	30	56.60	26	42.62	
Age at PIT	$M = 16.22$; $SD = 1.47$ Range = 12–18		$M = 16.29$; $SD = 1.14$ Range = 13–18		t (97.505) $= -0.274$ $p = .784$
Race					x^2 (5) = 0.267 $p = .998$
Hispanic	11	20.75	13	21.31	
White, not Hispanic	18	33.96	20	32.79	
Black, not Hispanic	17	32.08	19	31.15	
American Indian/Alaska Native, not Hispanic	4	7.55	5	8.20	
Asian, Native Hawaiian, and other Pacific Islander, not Hispanic	0	–	0	–	
Other or unknown race, not Hispanic	1	1.89	2	3.28	
Multiracial, not Hispanic	2	3.77	2	3.28	
Listed as missing from care in FCRO at PIT	32	60.38	21	34.43	x^2 (1) = 1.048 $p = .306$
Number of times in care, lifetime	$M = 1.98$; Median = 2.00 $SD = 1.12$; Range = 1–5		$M = 3.11$; Median = 3.00 $SD = 1.86$; Range = 1–8		t (100.187) $= -3.996$ $p < .001$
Number of out-of-home placements, lifetime	$M = 12.72$; Median = 10.00 $SD = 7.84$; Range = 1–37		$M = 5.57$; Median = 4.00 $SD = 5.72$; Range = 1–31		t (93.771) $= 5.484$ $p < .001$
Days in placement at PIT or last placement before missing	$M = 72.51$; Median = 36.00 $SD = 78.50$; Range = 5–354		$M = 130.45$; Median = 76.00 $SD = 165.46$; Range = 13–919		t (88.278) $= -2.438$ $p = .017$
Placement at PIT					x^2 (7) = 39.222 $p < .001$
Foster home (relative or fictive/kinship)	13	18.31	1	2.33	
Foster home (non-relative)	30	42.25	2	4.65	
Group home	9	12.68	10	23.26	
Institution	7	9.86	9	20.93	
Supervised independent living	2	2.82	1	2.33	
Trial home visit	1	1.41	0	–	
Detention facility	5	7.04	4	9.30	
Near permanency placement	4	5.63	16	37.21	
Agency involvement at missing					x^2 (4) = 81.388 $p < .001$
NDHHS/CFS	28	52.83	2	3.28	
Probation only	7	13.21	58	95.08	
NDHHS/CFS & probation	16	30.19	–	–	
NDHHS/OJS only	–	–	1	1.64	
NDHHS/OJS & probation	2	3.77	–	–	

Research question three aimed to address the context of missingness among children who were in OOH placements. To address this question, in-depth qualitative case information for a sub-set of officially reported missing children whose case had a review by the FCRO ($n = 53$; 46.49 %) was used. However, it is important to note that children's cases are reviewed approximately every 6 months, not at random. Thus, missing children whose case had been reviewed by FCRO and missing children whose case had not been reviewed by FCRO first were compared to assess any identifiable differences (see Table 3 below). There were no statistically significant differences between the reviewed and not reviewed samples on sex, age, or race/ethnicity. However, the groups varied significantly regarding the number of times a child was in care during their lifetime: the reviewed sample had been in care an average of 1.98 times compared to 3.11 times for the non-reviewed sample, t (100.187) = -3.996, $p < .001$. Similarly, the reviewed sample had been in an average of 12.72 different placements during their lifetime compared to 5.57 placements for the non-reviewed sample, t (93.771) = 5.484, $p < .001$. Children in the reviewed sample also had significantly fewer days in their placement on January 20, 2020, than children in the non-reviewed sample, a median of 36 days compared to a median of 76 days, t (88.278) = -2.438, $p = .017$.

Analyses also revealed significant differences between the two groups regarding the placement types from which they had gone missing, x^2 (7) = 39.222, $p < .001$. For example, in the reviewed sample, children were most likely to go missing from either relative or non-relative foster homes, while in the non-reviewed sample children were most likely to have gone missing after being returned home or from a group home or institution. Among the 53 children who were officially reported missing and listed as "missing from care" in the FCRO records, 60.38 % were among the review sample, x^2 (1) = 1.048, $p = .360$. Finally, significant differences were found between the two groups regarding which agency or combination of agencies had supervision of the child when they went missing from care, x^2 (4) = 81.388, $p < .001$. Children in the reviewed sample were most likely to be under the supervision of Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services/Child and Family Services only or in combination with Probation while children in the non-reviewed sample were most likely to be under the supervision of Probation only.

To examine the context of missingness among children in OOH care, case summaries for children who had a FCRO case file review were analyzed ($n = 53$). Children were anonymized with pseudonyms. This analysis was informed by the body of previous research suggesting that children in foster care often "run" to something/someone or from something/someone as well as important situational factors (i.e., experiences with violence, substance use) (e.g., Courtney et al., 2005; Crosland et al., 2018; Crosland & Dunlap, 2015). The range of case contexts identified in case file reviews are presented in Table 4. Case contexts were not mutually exclusive such that each factor related to the missingness episode identified in a child's case file was coded and included in the frequencies.

To begin, case summaries revealed that 2 children (3.77 %) ran to a trusted adult, while no children in the present sample ran to a boyfriend/girlfriend. Six (11.32 %) case summaries suggested the child ran from placement as a coping strategy: repeatedly leaving a placement had become an established pattern of behavior for these children. For example, one summary notes that "Matt has shown in the past that he does not have good coping skills when he is upset or feels out of control. He has not taken any steps to learn any new coping … [he] has expressed a desire to stop running, but he has repeatedly not been able to control his impulses and has run anyway".

Beyond the "running to, running from" dichotomy several other key factors related to missingness were identified. The most prevalent factor was the role mental health challenges seemed to play in the lives of missing children who were in an OOH placement. Analyses revealed that in 45 of the 53 (84.91 %) case files reviewed the child was either in need of or participating in mental health services. Often, missingness was the reason that a child's mental health care was not being properly managed. When a child went missing their services were terminated and if they returned to care, the continuity of care across service providers was challenging: a child may not be able to return to the same counselor, therapist, and/or physician. Thus, any progress made, or trust built prior to their missingness may be lost and the process of assisting the child must start from the beginning.

Further, 16 case summaries (30.19 %) revealed that the child was mental health treatment resistant. For example, a case summary may indicate treatment resistance with a note such as "Morgan is not participating in therapy services and is resistant to participating in services," or "Michael is unwilling to participate in therapy services". Treatment resistance included resistance or refusal to

Table 4
Case contexts related to missingness among children in out-of-home placements ($n = 53$).

	n	%
Running To…		
A trusted adult	2	3.77 %
Running from…		
As a coping mechanism	6	11.32 %
Children mental health challenges	45	84.91 %
Children treatment resistance	16	30.19 %
Placement not prepared for mental health challenge	5	9.43 %
Sex trafficking victimization	3	5.66 %
Children substance use	26	49.05 %
Children school problems		
Truancy/attendance issues	28	52.83 %
Behavioral issues	19	35.85 %
Permanency objective issues		
Children objects to placement	3	5.66 %
Violence in any placement	12	22.64 %
Victimization in any placement	6	11.32 %
Family of origin inappropriate contact	5	9.43 %
An adult knew where child was while missing	9	15.09 %

participate in therapy or other psychiatric counseling, refusal to consider taking recommended medications, or failure to remain medication compliant. Additionally, case summaries for 26 children (49.06 %) discussed substance use problems; however, only 7 children (13.21 %) were receiving services for substance abuse issues. Finally, 5 (9.43 %) summaries indicated that in at least one placement in the child's history the reason the placement was terminated was related to the child's mental health and that the child's behavior (e.g., running behaviors, acting out in school, etc.) was more than the foster caregivers felt they could handle.

Five children were suspected or documented victims of sex trafficking victimization, and 1 child was a suspected victim of labor trafficking (11.32 %). The implications of this victimization were discussed in three of the case summaries, and in one of the cases, the child's missingness from placement was linked to trafficking victimization directly. The summary indicated, "…it was reported to Probation that during Jenny's last event running, she was found in a hotel with adult males. There is a concern that she could have been abused or exploited by these men". At the same time, narratives suggested that children often did not recognize their experience as victimization. For example, one case summary read, "Sarah does not view herself as a victim and has not been agreeable to any interventions, despite law enforcement involvement". Additionally, one of the summaries revealed that a child had likely been a victim of labor trafficking; however, no further details were available for analysis.

Problems in school were another recurring theme in these case summaries. Irregular attendance in school was discussed in the case summaries for 28 children (52.83 %). Guardians reported that the children felt that they did not need to attend school, and it was common for the guardian to indicate that they had trouble getting the child to attend school. For example, one summary noted that, "Jeremy has changed schools a number of times due to his placement changes and he has a history of truancy. Even when he was in school, he usually refused to do his work, so he has failed most classes. He is so far behind in credits; he knows he won't be able to graduate so he is not motivated and doesn't see the point in trying." Another theme identified in relation to school was children's behavioral issues when they did attend school. Behavioral issues in school were indicated in 19 (35.85 %) case summaries. For example, one summary revealed that "Darius has been suspended on numerous occasions and has over 55 instances this school year which have resulted in disciplinary actions."

In addition to mental health and school problems, the third major area of concern identified in the qualitative analysis was children's permanency objective. In 3 cases (5.66 %) the summary indicated that the child did not agree with their stated permanency objective. In some instances, the child indicated that they had another preference for where or with whom they should live. For example, one summary indicated that "When asked what would make him successful, Allan responded with "living with mom". He indicates that things are going well in the current placement, but there is nothing better "than living with mom." However, in many cases the child simply objected to their current permanency objective.

In addition, some children objected to their permanency objective due to inappropriate contact from the family of origin. In 5 cases (9.43 %), a parent from the child's family of origin was contacting the child despite not being allowed visitation or contact by the courts. For example, one summary read, "All four children contact one another telephonically. It was discovered, the children's group chat included their mother, which was not being allowed due to lack of supervision". In these cases, this "false hope" of reunification became a significant issue for the child who might otherwise do well in their placement and/or resulted in negative behaviors from the child.

Violence and victimization in placement were also identified as a barrier to permanency for children. Six children (11.32 %) had committed violence in their placements, and each time there was violence, the child was moved to another placement. Primarily, this violence comprised of physical fights with other children in the placement or with the adult guardian. One example of violence in the placement in a summary read "She recently assaulted Mr. Smith twice. She broke his glasses but did not cause any injury to him. Anna broke a window". Additionally, 12 children (22.64 %) were victims of violence in a placement. In these instances, it is usually a family member of the child or a friend/relative of the adult(s) in the placement who is responsible for perpetrating the victimization. For example, one child's summary indicated that they had been sexually assaulted by a cousin while in a placement.

Finally, the analysis of the case summaries revealed that in 9 cases (15.09 %) there was evidence that someone, usually the case worker or a family member of the child, knew where the child was while they were missing from their placement. In 4 cases, a family member was aiding the child in staying missing. For example, one summary indicated "The relatives had harbored the children while they were on run and did not notify" and in another instance the summary indicated "Ms. Jones indicates she has consistent contact with Jason but is unwilling to disclose his whereabouts".

6. Discussion and implications

A significant body of prior research has examined the prevalence and context of children who run away from foster care (Branscum & Richards, 2022; Courtney et al., 2005; Lin, 2012; Witherup et al., 2008), however little is known about children who go missing from OOH care placements. The present exploratory study used unique data from a point-in-time count of missing persons in Nebraska and administrative data from the Nebraska Foster Care Review Office to address this gap in the literature. First, findings showed that nearly 30 % of children who had been reported missing in Nebraska were in OOH care placements. Missing children who were in OOH care placements had more complete data (e.g., a known race/ethnicity) and had been missing for shorter periods of time than children who were missing from their families of origin. These differences may be due to the available data and multiple people – case workers, foster caregivers, probation officers – who have responsibility for the safety and security of children in OOH care as well as the policies and procedures for reporting missing children. However, these policies and practices are largely unknown, and for example, among probation, not always publicly available. As such, additional research is needed to understand if policies and/or processes for communication between system actors regarding reporting children who are missing from OOH placements could be improved.

Further examination of the population of children who were in OOH care placements showed that 2.77 % were missing from care;

this finding is consistent with other research using point-in-time count data such as Lin's (2012) study showing that 2 % of children in the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System data were not present in their foster care placements (i.e., listed as a runaway). Regarding children's demographics, consistent with prior studies on children identified as runaways from foster placements, White children were underrepresented as missing from care while children of color were overrepresented as missing from care (Branscum & Richards, 2022; Lin, 2012; Nesmith, 2006; Wulczyn, 2020); American Indian/Alaska Native children were missing at more than 1.5 times their rate of representation in Nebraska's OOH care population, while Black children were missing at 1.62 times their representation. Similarly, children who were missing from OOH were older than children who were not missing (see Branscum & Richards, 2022; Courtney et al., 2005; Courtney & Zinn, 2009; Dworsky et al., 2018). However, diverging from the literature on running away from foster care showing that girls are more likely to run (e.g., Branscum & Richards, 2022; Dworsky, Wulczyn, & Huang, 2018; Kim et al., 2015; Sunseri, 2003), the present research found no gender differences regarding children who were missing from an OOH placement.

Regarding placement stability, consistent with prior research regarding children who are identified as runaways from foster care, children who had more times in care (Branscum & Richards, 2022; Clark et al., 2008; Courtney et al., 2005) or more placements (Branscum & Richards, 2022; Children's Bureau U.S., 2018) were more likely to be missing from care than children who had less episodes in care or had fewer placements. In addition, less time in a child's current placement was associated with missingness. Like prior literature, children who were missing from care were disproportionately missing from a group home or institution (Courtney et al., 2005; Witherup et al., 2008). Children in a relative or kinship foster home were underrepresented among missing children. Departing from the literature on children who run away from foster care (see Courtney et al., 2005; Witherup et al., 2008), children who had been returned home to their family of origin were also disproportionately missing. Indeed, while only 5.12 % of all children who were in OOH placements in Nebraska were in *any type* of near permanency placement at the point-in-time of study, 17.54 % of children who were missing from placements were missing from their family of origin after being returned home. These findings prompt questions regarding the decision-making process for reunification: Were these children returned too soon, were underlying factors related to prior episodes of missingness from care left unaddressed? Additional research is needed to better understand whether families have the necessary supports in place both before and after reunification to keep children safe and the family secure.

Finally, children who were missing from care were disproportionately under the supervision of Probation, either alone or concurrently with Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services/Child and Family Services. Prior research demonstrates that children who are under the supervision of probation, as well as "cross-over" youth (i.e., those children who are under supervision by both child welfare and youth justice agencies), often have significant needs including mental health, substance use, and trauma histories (Herz & Ryan, 2008; Young et al., 2015), factors that have also been associated with running away from care in previous literature (e.g., Branscum & Richards, 2022; Lin, 2012). However, the prevalence of these children among officially reported missing children may also be due to a heightened level of supervision compared to children in OOH care placements that are not supervised by probation. In practice, if a child who is in an out-of-home placement due to delinquency status is not present at their placement, they would be considered to have absconded from care which may obscure risks and needs that led to the child going missing from placement. Additional research must attempt to unpack (1) whether possible system-level policies yield at least some responsibility for these disparities as well as (2) focus on the underlying factors associated with missingness among children in OOH placements who are under the supervision of probation agencies.

Examination of children's FCRO file reviews shed some light on the underlying factors associated with missingness among the OOH care population. Specifically, among the reviewed sample, there was evidence that few children had bonds to school (i.e., through attendance or passing grades). In addition, there were high rates of mental health and substance use challenges coupled with low rates of reported receipt of mental health and/or substance use treatment services. These qualitative data suggested that for many children who were missing from care, the relationships between these risk factors and missingness was complex and likely moderated by significant levels of placement instability.

Children had experienced multiple placement changes, potentially because of behavioral issues including leaving their OOH care placements, which in turn, impacted opportunities to achieve in school and disrupted relationships with mental and behavioral health specialists. Changes in mental and behavioral health specialists also require youth to repeatedly (re)disclose trauma and victimization histories to these new care providers. Minimizing the number of times child victims of abuse must (re)tell their story to different system actors has been identified as a best practice in child abuse forensic interviewing (Jones et al., 2005). The present findings highlight the need to consider ways to minimize repeated disclosures for system involved children as they move care placements.

In addition, several children, all teenagers, reported leaving their placements to live with another caregiver whom they preferred. In these types of cases – cases where youth have repeatedly left an OOH placement for a preferred adult caregiver – system-level decision makers might consider whether optimal outcomes could be achieved by listening to the youth's placement preference and providing supportive services to this caregiver. Similarly, these findings suggest in some cases children's otherwise successful placements are disrupted by non-custodial parents, who for example, aid children in leaving their placements or provide children with misinformation regarding family reunification. Taken together these findings are in line with prior research on running away that suggests that children may run to preferred or trusted adults or caregivers (Courtney et al., 2005; Crosland et al., 2018; Crosland & Dunlap, 2015).

Findings further showed evidence consistent with prior research suggesting that children might run from a placement due to violence or victimization (Courtney et al., 2005; Crosland et al., 2018; Crosland & Dunlap, 2015). In some cases, there was evidence of abuse in the OOH care placement or suspicion or documentation of trafficking victimization. Prior research shows that children in OOH care experience higher rates of physical and sexual abuse (Euser et al., 2014) and exposures to violence (Turney & Wildeman, 2017) when compared to children living in biological families. Further, evidence suggests that children "on the run" from foster

placements may be particularly vulnerable to trafficking victimization (Latzman et al., 2019). The present findings highlight the need to consider victimization experiences as a risk factor for missingness among children who were in OOH placements and that a higher level of training for foster caregivers is likely needed to keep children who have experienced victimizations in a previous placement present in their next placement. Likewise, ways to improve children's connections with foster care providers should be considered. Finally, results prompt questions about whether the term "runaway" should be used to describe children who are missing from their care placements and how and when the distinction between "runaway" and "missing child" are made.

6.1. Limitations and future research

While the present study provided novel evaluation of missingness among children who were in an OOH placement, several limitations must be noted. To begin, these data stemmed from a point-in-time count of missing persons, and thus, did not capture children who went missing and were found before January 20, 2020, or went missing after January 20, 2020. In addition, the most detailed data (i.e., case file reviews) from FCRO were only available for children who had a recent file review, and reviewed children only included about half of the children who had been officially reported missing from their care placement. There are many reasons that children might not have a review, such as 1) reviews typically are not conducted for children in care less than 6 months, 2) processes for probation reviews make it difficult to add alternative cases if a child returns home prior to review, 3) priority is given to cases with upcoming court dates, and 4) many probation cases do not have court reviews, among others. As such, the qualitative data from the review sample was not representative of the total population of children who were missing from care placements.

Future research must continue to examine the linkages between going missing and OOH care placements. Recent research has identified the disparate impact of missingness in Black and Native American communities (Richards et al., 2021). Given the disproportionate involvement of Black and Native American children in the foster care system and among children identified as runaways from foster care (Branscum & Richards, 2022; Lin, 2012), these relationships must be further unpacked. Likewise, future research should examine the prevalence of children who identify as LGBTQ+ who are missing from an OOH placement as these children are disproportionately represented among foster children (Gambon et al., 2020). Finally, the present findings suggest that children with placement instability or who were in OOH care placements due to their delinquency status should be an explicit focus of additional inquiry as should the relationships between violence and victimization and missingness among children in OOH placements. Exploratory findings reported here should serve as a foundation for future, hypothesis-driven research using multivariate modeling.

7. Conclusion

While prior research has addressed predictors of running away from foster care, it is unclear how prior studies have made the distinction between children who are missing from care and children who have run away from care. The present study took a novel approach by examining the prevalence of children who had been officially reported missing within the population of children who were in OOH placements. Findings demonstrated that nearly one third of missing children were missing from state care and that these children were more likely to be children of color, to have spent more time in state care with less placement stability, and to be under probation supervision than children who were in OOH placements who were not missing from care. Future research and policy priorities must focus on ways to identify and intervene in the lives of children in out-home-placements before they go missing from care.

Funding information

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

Appendix A

The following definitions for OOH placement types are used by FCRO. FCRO definitions align with definitions used by the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services definitions, and some are defined in statute.

Relative placement/kinship foster home. Neb. Rev. Stat. §71-1901(9) defines relative placement [foster home] as one in which the foster caregiver has a blood, marriage, or adoption relationship to the child or a sibling of the child, and for Indian children they may also be an extended family member per the Indian Child Welfare Act. Per Neb. Rev. Stat. §71-1901(7) kinship home is defined as a home where a child or children receive out-of-home care and at least one of the primary caretakers has previously lived with or is a trusted adult that has a preexisting, significant relationship with the child or children or a sibling of such child or children as described in Neb. Rev. Stat. §43-1311.02(8).

Non-relative foster home. A non-relative foster home. is a home which provides foster care to a child or children pursuant to a foster care placement as defined in Neb. Rev. Stat. §43-1301 and which does not qualify as either a relative or kinship placement.

Group home. Group homes provide care for four or more children and are not a foster family home as defined in Neb. Rev. Stat. § 71-1901, and are not facilities that specialize in psychiatric, medical, or juvenile justice related issues, or group emergency placements.

Institutions. Institutions include medical hospitals, psychiatric hospitals, psychiatric residential treatment facilities, other specialized treatment facilities, or emergency shelters.

Supervised independent living. Supervised independent living is for wards nearing the age of majority but who have not yet been emancipated and that are primarily living independently, including in college dormitories or in an apartment.

Trial home visits. Neb. Rev. Stat. §71-1301(10) defines trial home visits as temporary placements with the parent from which the child was removed and during which the Court and NDHHS/CFS remains involved. This applies only to NDHHS wards, not to youth who are only under Probation supervision.

Detention facility. A detention facility placement is operated by a political subdivision that exists primarily for juveniles with delinquency or law violation issues or youth who are held while waiting disposition of charges against them.

Near permanency placement. Near permanency placements include placements that have formally agreed to adopt or finalize a guardianship.

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