

## SCRANTON POLICE DEPARTMENT POLICY

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**Response to Missing Children Investigations**

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### **I. PURPOSE**

The purpose of this policy is to establish guidelines and responsibilities regarding the Scranton Police Department's response to reports of missing children.

### **II. POLICY**

- A. It shall be the policy of the Scranton Police Department to thoroughly investigate all reports of missing children immediately regardless of age or circumstances. Additionally this agency holds that every child reported as missing will be considered **at risk** until significant information to the contrary is confirmed.
- B. Jurisdictional conflicts are to be avoided when a child is reported missing. If a child either resides in or was last seen in this jurisdiction, this agency will immediately initiate the required reporting process. If a child resides in this jurisdiction and was last seen in another jurisdiction, but the law enforcement agency covering that jurisdiction chooses not to take a missing child report, this agency will assume reporting and investigative responsibility.
- C. Questions concerning parental custody occasionally arise in relation to missing child reports. It shall be the policy of the Scranton Police Department to accept the report of a missing child even if custody has not been established. Reporting parties shall be encouraged to obtain legal custody as soon as possible; however since the safety of the missing child(ren) is paramount, members of the department will open a case when it can be shown that the child has been removed, without explanation, from his or her usual place of residence.

### III. Definitions

- A. The term *missing child* refers to a person who is
1. Younger than 21 years of age (Suzanne's Law)
  2. Whose whereabouts are unknown to his/her parent, guardian or responsible party
- B. The term *unusual circumstances* refers to a missing child who is
1. *Thirteen (13) years of age or younger.* This age was established by the federal Missing Children Assistance Act because children of this age group have not established independence from parental control, and do not have the survival skills necessary to protect themselves from exploitation on the streets; or
  2. Believed to be (one or more of the following):
    - a. *Out of the zone of safety for his/her age and development stage.* The zone of safety will vary depending on the age of the child and his/her developmental stage. In the case of an infant, for example, the zone of safety will include the presence of an adult custodian or the crib, stroller or carriage in which the infant was placed. For a school aged child, the zone of safety might be the immediate neighborhood or the route taken between home and school.
    - b. *Mentally diminished.* If the child is developmentally disabled or emotionally disturbed he or she may have difficulty communicating with others about needs, identity, or address. This disability places the child in danger of exploitation.
    - c. *Drug dependent,* including both prescription and illicit substances. Any drug dependency puts the missing child at risk. The diabetic or epileptic child requires regular medication or his/her condition may become critical. The illicit drug abuser, on the other hand, may resort to crime or become the victim of exploitation.
    - d. *A potential victim of foul play or sexual exploitation.* Risk to the child can be assumed if investigation indicates a possible abduction, violence at the scene of abduction, or signs of sexual abuse.
    - e. *In a life threatening situation.* The environment in which the child is missing may be particularly hazardous. Examples of dangerous environment could be a busy highway for a toddler or an all night business for a young teenager.
    - f. *Absent from the home for more than twenty-four (24) hours before being reported missing to the police as missing.* While some parents may incorrectly assume that twenty-four (24) hours must pass before police will accept a missing person case, a delay in reporting might also indicate the existence of neglect or abuse within the family.

- g. *Believed to be with others who could endanger his or her welfare.* A missing child in such circumstances is in danger not only of sexual exploitation but of involvement in criminal activity.
  - h. *Is absent under circumstances inconsistent with established patterns of behavior.* Most children have an established routine that is reasonably predictable. Significant unexplained deviations from that routine increase the probability of risk to the child; or
3. Whose disappearance involves circumstances that would cause a reasonable person to believe that the child should be considered at risk.

#### C. Determination of Usual Circumstances

1. If it is determined that unusual circumstances are involved in the report of a missing child, an expanded investigation, including the use of all appropriate resources, will commence immediately. While all missing child incidents should be investigated thoroughly, those involving unusual circumstances indicate a heightened likelihood of risk to the child and, therefore, require an intensive response.
2. If appropriate, existing interagency response protocols should be activated. Pre-planned strategies for responding to missing child reports are essential for successful case resolution. By identifying all of the services and resources a region has available to search for missing children, multi-agency agreements can be reached beforehand and activated promptly when the need arises.

### IV. PROCEDURES

#### A. First Responder

1. Respond promptly to the scene of the report.  
Even if the assigned officer has been provided with initial information such as the child's description and other facts about the incident, it would be inappropriate to delay response to circle through parks, check playgrounds, or stop suspicious individuals. These activities can be handled by other patrol units unless in immediate response to the child's safety.
2. Interview parent(s) or person who is making the initial report.  
The purpose of this interview is to gain insight into the circumstances surrounding the disappearance and other information needed to conduct an initial assessment of the case. Officers should use the Investigative Checklist for First Responders to enable the officer to more promptly reach an accurate risk assessment.
3. Obtain a description of the missing child.

The collection of information about the missing child (i.e., race, height, weight, hair and eye color, clothing, and other noteworthy features) should be done promptly and relayed to other officers who may be assisting in the investigation. Several recent photographs and a video image, if available, should be secured. The use of a missing report form will expedite the collection of descriptive information.

4. Verify that the child is in fact missing.  
First responders should never assume that searches conducted by distraught parents or others have been performed in a thorough manner. Another check of the house and grounds should be made that includes places that children could be trapped, asleep or hiding. Special attention should be paid to enclosures like refrigerators, freezers and the interior of parked cars where limited breathing air may place the child at even greater risk. In the case of older children, first responders should ask if parents have checked with the child's friends or perhaps overlooked or forgotten something the child may have said that would explain the absence. Note: a search of the home should be conducted even if the child was last seen elsewhere.
5. Confirm the child's custody status.  
First responders should ascertain whether a dispute of the child's custody might have played a role in the disappearance. Questions regarding whether the reporting party has full legal custody, or if the non-custodial parent has been contesting custody, or if the missing child expressed a wish to live with the other parent may help an officer gain important insight into the case.
6. Identify the circumstances of the disappearance.  
First responders need to ascertain whether the circumstances surrounding the child's disappearance are such that a heightened level of response is warranted. If *unusual circumstances* exist, as defined above, then the decision to employ additional response methods is clear. In other situations where the circumstances are not clear, officers should keep the missing child's safety in mind and act accordingly.
7. Determine when, where and by whom the child was last seen.  
This information is needed to determine factors such as abduction time frame, windows of opportunity and information verification. Comparison of information gathered from the reporting party, witnesses and other sources may prove vital to case direction.
8. Interview the individual(s) who last had contact with the child.  
Effective questioning of those individuals who last saw or spoke with the missing child is crucial in the case assessment process. While seeking information about the child's disappearance, demeanor and actions

officers should also be alert to contradictions and evasiveness by the witness, especially if these statements cannot be readily sustained.

9. Identify the child's zone of safety for his/her age and developmental stage. Responding officers should attempt to determine how far a child could travel from the location where last seen before he or she would most likely be at risk of injury or exploitation. This perimeter should, under many circumstances, define the first search zone.
10. Make an initial determination of the type of incident.  
By employing all available assessment tools (e.g., completion of Investigative Checklist, interviews with parents, statements of witnesses, search of scene, etc.) an officer should be able to reach a preliminary determination regarding the type of case and the need for additional resources. Note: officers must be cautious in "labeling" or classifying a missing child case, since the classification process will affect the way in which initial information or evidence is gathered. Even if first indications suggest a "less urgent" incident, officers should consider all possibilities until the case category is clearly determined.
11. Obtain a description of the suspected abductor(s) and other pertinent information.  
Officers need to record witness information immediately. This is not only for general investigative use, but also because witnesses may forget details or may speak to others who might confuse the witnesses or make suggestions about what was actually observed. If the abduction scene involves a business or other public place, officers should try to supplement witness information with video from security cameras that might provide crucial information about suspect, vehicles, and circumstances. In the case of a suspected family abduction, the reporting party may have photographs of the abductor or other information.
12. Determine the correct NCIC Missing Person File category and ensure that a notification is promptly transmitted.  
There are five (5) categories within the missing person file: disability, endangered, involuntary, juvenile and catastrophe. Simply because the child is less than 18 years of age does not require that the juvenile category must be used. The circumstances of the disappearance should govern category classification. Note: NCIC suggests that family and non-family abductions be entered in the involuntary classification. Runaways are most commonly entered in the juvenile category unless unusual circumstances exist.
13. Provide detailed descriptive information to Comm Center for broadcast updates.

As information becomes available regarding the child's disappearance, circumstances of the case, or description of the potential abductor, officers should ensure that other officers and agencies are provided with up-to-date facts.

14. Identify and review everyone at the scene.  
Officers should record the name, address and work and home phone numbers of everyone present at the scene along with his/her relationship with the missing child. If possible, include them in photographs and/or videotapes of the incident scene. By interviewing each person privately, officers may be able to uncover information that will be instrumental in resolution of the case.
15. Conduct a thorough scene search.  
With the assistance of additional personnel, a systematic and thorough search of the scene for the child should be conducted. If appropriate, officers should obtain written permission to search houses, apartments, vehicles and other property that might hold information about the child's disappearance. Officers are again reminded to conduct a thorough, immediate search of the child's home and property even if the disappearance supposedly took place elsewhere.
16. Secure and safeguard the area as a potential crime scene.  
First responders must take control of the immediate area where the incident occurred and establish an appropriate perimeter to avoid destruction of vital evidence. In addition to external crime scenes, the child's home, and particularly his or her bedroom, should be secured and protected until evidence and identification material such as hair, bite marks, etc. are collected.
17. Record if the child has access to an on-line computer or cellular phone.  
Before making an initial decision that the child has runaway, an officer should determine if the child may have left to meet someone he or she encountered while on-line. Since predators are known to use the internet to identify vulnerable children, what appears to be a runaway case, may in fact be a child a great risk. Additionally, since many children have their own cell phones and may have them while missing, an officer should note these devices during the information gathering process.
18. Prepare the necessary reports and complete appropriate forms.  
Information gathered by the first responding officer may be instrumental in the eventual case solution. When recording this important information, officers should prepare a chronological account of their involvement and actions in the case from time of assignment to the point of dismissal. Reports should include everything, not just those events that seem to have a direct bearing on the case.

19. Missing child returned prior to report being filed.

In the case where a reported missing child has returned prior to report being completed, the first responder shall complete the missing person report, and then complete a supplemental report that the child has returned. This must be verified by the officer (see procedures in Section E.

B. Supervisor

The Supervisor who is assigned to the report of a missing child will be responsible to

1. Obtain a briefing from the first responding officer and other agency personnel at the scene.  
This briefing allows the supervisor to determine the scope and complexity of the case and thus develop an appropriate response. The briefing should be conducted away from the family, friends and any other individuals who may be present. Doing so will allow officers to speak freely about the events that have transpired and to pass along initial impressions and opinions that might be misconstrued by others.
2. Determine if additional personnel and resources are needed to assist in the investigation.  
Depending upon the situation, the supervisor may determine that additional personnel, including specialized units, should be called to the scene or otherwise assist in the investigation. Certain cases may also require that the supervisor activate existing interagency response protocols.
3. Establish a command post.  
A command post is a field headquarters for scene management. It is used as a center for organizing personnel and directing investigative efforts as well as a focal point for inquiries, intelligence gathering, and media contacts. As a general rule, the command post should be close enough to the center of activity to facilitate control and coordination, but sufficiently apart to allow free exchange of ideas among responders. Using the victim's home as a command post is not recommended.
4. Organize and coordinate search efforts.  
Systematic searches are common features of missing person investigations. A supervisor shall appoint a search operation coordinator who can oversee the search effort while the supervisor remains available to manage the entire investigation.
5. Ensure that all required notifications have been made.  
Because dissemination of information is an integral part of the search for a missing child, the supervisor should ensure that all officers, other

departments and agencies, and all investigative networks are supplied with accurate details.

6. Establish a Liaison with the victim family.  
Families of a missing child will experience extreme stress. Supervisors should establish a liaison with the victim-family to explain what investigative actions are being employed and what they can do to assist in the search.
7. Confirm that all agency policies and procedures are observed.  
In addition to providing the innovative direction required during a missing child investigation, a supervisor must also ensure that the rules and regulations of a professional law enforcement organization are adhered to. Established policy and procedures, especially those related to missing children, should be regularly reviewed to ensure compliance.
8. Manage media relations.  
Many missing child investigations, especially involving large-scale search efforts, are likely to draw media attention. Supervisors will review/comply with Policy 07-010 Police-Media Relations throughout the investigation.

#### C. Investigator

The investigator who is assigned to the report of a missing child will be responsible to

1. Obtain a briefing from agency personnel at the scene.  
This briefing should be conducted prior to interviews with family members of the missing child or witnesses who may have been identified during the initial stage of the case.
2. Verify the accuracy of all descriptive information.  
The verification process should include all details developed during the preliminary investigation. During the interview process the investigator should be alert to facts or statements that conflict with those gathered by the first responder.
3. Conduct a neighborhood investigation.  
A thorough canvass of the neighborhood should be conducted without delay. The objective is to identify and interview all persons within the abduction zone who may be able to provide information related to the incident. Investigators should use a standardized set of questions to ensure completeness and uniformity of information and facilitate establishment of a database to track leads. Records should also be made of all vehicles parked within the neighborhood and any other conditions that may have future investigative value.
4. Obtain a brief history of recent family dynamics.



Information about family dynamics, obtained from family members, neighbors, teachers, classmates and witnesses can offer valuable insights into what may have happened to the child and where he or she may be found. Records of family contact maintained by law enforcement agencies, social service agencies, schools and other organizations should also be obtained and evaluated.

5. Explore the basis for conflicting information.  
When preliminary investigative steps have been taken, investigators should “compare notes” with the first responder, fellow investigators, and other agency personnel to identify and work through conflicting information. This collaborative evaluation will provide the investigative staff with a solid foundation upon which to structure future case directions.
6. Implement effective case management.  
An information case management system is an essential part of the overall investigative process. Depending on the resources available, information may either be computerized or incorporated in a card system.
7. Evaluate the need for additional resources or specialized units.  
The complexity of many missing child incidents may necessitate the use of resources and services both from within the agency and from other organizations as well. Investigators should be aware of the input that can be obtained from resources such as the FBI, NCIC, State missing children clearinghouses and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.
8. Update descriptive information.  
If it appears that the case will not be resolved promptly, investigators should ensure that the descriptive record, especially that entered into NCIC Missing Person File and/or the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NAMUS), is updated to include dental characteristics, scars, marks and tattoos, fingerprints, DNA, along with additional articles of clothing, jewelry and unique possessions.

#### D. Unidentified Children

An officer assigned to a report of an unidentified person, whether living or deceased, who appears to be a child, will be responsible to

1. Obtain a complete description.  
Officers that are assigned to this task should utilize standardized forms such as the NCIC Unidentified Person File Worksheet.
2. Enter the child’s description into the NCIC Unidentified Person File.  
This file is compared daily with the contents of the NCIC Missing Person File. Entries with common characteristics are flagged and both agencies are informed.

3. Utilize all available resources to aid in the identification of the child. The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, state missing children clearinghouse, and other organizations, such as medical examiners associations may be of assistance in the identification.
4. Cancel all notifications after the identification is confirmed.

E. Recovery and/or Case Closure

An officer who is assigned to the recovery or return of a missing child will be responsible to

1. Verify that the returned child is, in fact, the reported missing child. An officer shall personally verify all returns. The benefits of this practice include assessing the child's safety, gaining intelligence about possible predators, and preventing future episodes.
2. Arrange for intervention services, if indicated. During the verification process, officers should be alert for indications that additional services may be needed before the child can safely remain with the family. These services may include mental and/or physical health examinations and arrangements for family counseling.
3. Complete the appropriate supplemental reports and cancel all outstanding notifications. Along with cancellation of the NCIC Missing Person File entry and other notifications regarding the case, a supplemental report shall be completed that describes the child's activities while missing and the circumstances of the recovery/return. Child must be removed from the system in a timely manner.

F. Requirements for Amber Alert Notifications

The AMBER Alert plan is a method of alerting citizens of Pennsylvania when a child has been abducted. The Amber plan uses Emergency Alert Systems to warn citizens by radio and television when a child abduction has occurred. The Emergency alert contains information regarding the victim, the suspect, and if applicable the suspect's vehicle information.

In order for the Pennsylvania Amber Alert Plan to be activated, law enforcement must be satisfied the following criteria have been met;

1. The abducted child must be under the age of 18; (Law Enforcement must confirm the abduction).
2. The abducted child is believed to be in imminent danger of death or serious bodily injury.
3. The Abducted Child must be entered immediately into the National Crime Information System (NCIC)

Additional factors are to be considered in the decision making process as to whether or not to activate the PA Amber Alert Plan. These factors include, but are not limited to availability of descriptive information which could assist in the recovery of a child, time elapsed since the child was last seen, and reliability of witness.

A shift supervisor on scene will make the call to the Pennsylvania State Police Watch Center at (877) 777 9975 or (717) 346-5512. A brief synopsis of the abduction shall be provided and an amber alert shall be requested.

The decision to activate an Amber Alert Plan will be made by the PSP Criminal Investigation Assessment Unit or the Missing Endangered Persons Advisory System (MEPAS) based on the facts provided by the supervisor regarding the abduction.

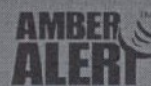
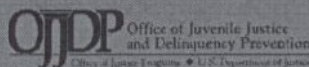
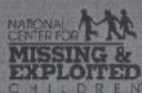
By Order Of:

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Chief Carl R. Graziano  
Superintendent of Police  
Scranton Police Department

**Attachments:**  
**Investigative Checklist for First Responders.**

## INVESTIGATIVE CHECKLIST FOR FIRST RESPONDERS



This checklist is meant to provide a framework of actions, considerations, and activities that may assist in performing competent, productive, and thorough missing/abducted-children investigations.

### First Responder

- If circumstances warrant, consider activating patrol-vehicle-mounted video camera when approaching the scene to record vehicles, people, and anything else of note for later investigative review.
- Interview parent(s)/guardian(s)/person who made the initial report.
- Confirm the child is in fact missing.
- Verify the child's custody status.
- Identify the circumstances of the disappearance.
- Determine when, where, and by whom the missing child was last seen.
- Interview the individuals who last had contact with the child.
- Identify the child's zone of safety for his or her age and developmental stage.
- Based on the available information, make an **initial** determination of the type of incident whether nonfamily abduction; family abduction; runaway; or lost, injured, or otherwise missing.
- Obtain a **detailed** description of the missing child, abductor, and any vehicles used.
- Secure photographs/videotapes of the missing child/abductor.
- Evaluate whether the circumstances of the child's disappearance meet **AMBER Alert criteria** and/or other immediate community-notification protocol. Discuss plan activation with supervisor.
- Relay detailed descriptive information to communications unit for broadcast updates.
- Determine need for additional personnel including investigative and supervisory staff.
- Brief and bring up-to-date all additional responding personnel.
- Identify and separately interview everyone at the scene. Make sure their interview and identifying information is properly recorded. To aid in this process, if possible, take pictures or record video images of everyone present. Video cameras affixed to patrol vehicles may be helpful with this task.
  - Note name, address, home/business telephone numbers of each person.
  - Determine each person's relationship to the missing child.
  - Note information each person may have about the child's disappearance.
  - Determine when/where each person last saw the child.
  - Ask each one, "What do you think happened to the child?"
  - Obtain names/addresses/telephone numbers of the child's friends/associates and other relatives and friends of the family.
- Continue to keep communications unit apprised of all appropriate developing information for broadcast updates.
- Obtain and note permission to search home or building where incident took place.
- Conduct an immediate, thorough search of the missing child's home, **even if the child was reported missing from a different location**.
- Seal/protect scene and area of the child's home (including the child's personal articles such as hairbrush, diary, photographs, and items with the child's fingerprints/footprints/teeth impressions) so evidence is not destroyed during or after the initial search and to help ensure items which could help in the search for and/or to identify the child are preserved. Determine if any of the child's personal items are missing. If possible, photograph/videotape these areas.
- Evaluate the contents and appearance of the child's room/residence.
- Inquire if the child has access to the Internet and evaluate its role in the disappearance.
- Ascertain if the child has a cellular telephone or other electronic communication device.
- Extend search to surrounding areas including vehicles and other places of concealment.
- Treat areas of interest as potential crime scenes.
- Determine if surveillance or security cameras in the vicinity may have captured information about the child's disappearance.
- Interview other family members, friends/associates of the child, and friends of the family to determine
  - When each last saw the child.
  - What they think happened to the child.
- Review sex-offender registries to determine if individuals designated as sexual predators live, work, or might otherwise be associated with the area of the child's disappearance.



- Ensure information regarding the missing child is entered into the National Crime Information Center's (NCIC) Missing Person File within two hours of report receipt and any information about a suspected abductor is entered into the NCIC Wanted Person File. (Carefully review NCIC categories before entering the case, and be sure to use the Child-Abduction flag whenever possible.)
- Prepare flier/bulletin with the child/abductor's photograph and descriptive information. Distribute in appropriate geographic regions.
- Prepare reports/make all required notifications.

#### Supervisory Officer

- Obtain briefing and written reports from the first responding officer and other personnel at the scene.
- Decide if circumstances of the child's disappearance meet the protocol in place for activation of an **AMBER Alert** and/or other immediate community-notification systems.
- Determine if additional personnel are needed to assist in the investigation.
- Establish a command post away from the child's residence.
- Determine if additional assistance is necessary from
  - State Police.
  - Missing-Children Clearinghouse.
  - FBI.
  - Specialized Units.
  - Victim-Witness Services.
  - NCMEC's Project ALERT/Team Adam.
- Confirm all the required resources, equipment, and assistance necessary to conduct an efficient investigation have been requested and expedite their availability.
- Ensure coordination/cooperation among all law-enforcement personnel involved in the investigation and search effort.
- Verify all required notifications are made.
- Ensure all agency policies and procedures are in compliance.
- Be available to make any decisions or determinations as they develop.
- Use media including radio, television, and newspapers to assist in the search throughout the duration of the case.

#### Investigative Officer

- Obtain briefing from the first responding officer and other on-scene personnel.
- Verify the accuracy of all descriptive information and other details developed during the preliminary investigation.
- Initiate a neighborhood canvass using a standardized questionnaire.
- Obtain a brief, recent history of family dynamics.
- Correct and investigate the reasons for conflicting information offered by witnesses and other individuals.
- Collect article(s) of the child's clothing for scent-tracking purposes.
- Review and evaluate all available information and evidence collected.
- Secure the child's latest medical and dental records.
- Contact landfill management and request they segregate garbage and dumping containers from key investigative areas in cases where it is suspected there may be imminent danger to the missing child.
- Develop and execute an investigative plan.
- Conduct a criminal-history check on all principal suspects and participants in the investigation.
- Determine what additional resources and specialized services are required.
- Ensure details of the case have been reported to NCMEC.
- Prepare and update bulletins for local law-enforcement agencies, missing-children clearinghouse(s), the FBI, and other appropriate agencies.
- Establish a telephone hotline for receipt of tips and leads.
- Establish a leads-management system to prioritize leads and help ensure each one is reviewed and followed up on. **Note:** NCMEC has developed software, named the Simple Leads Management System, designed to manage and prioritize leads associated with missing-child investigations. It is available at no cost by calling NCMEC's Missing Children Division toll-free at 1-888-24-NCMEC (1-888-246-2632).