



CITY OF MADISON POLICE DEPARTMENT STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURE



Missing Child

Eff. Date 11/24/2025

Purpose

The purpose of this procedure is to establish guidelines and responsibilities regarding Madison Police Department's (MPD) response to reports of missing children.

The term "missing child" typically refers to a person who is younger than 18 years of age. However, federal law requires NCIC notification when a person between the ages of 18-21 is reported missing as well. Anyone under the age of 21, reported as missing shall be investigated accordingly and without delay.

MPD investigates all reports of missing children. Each case will be assessed to determine the risk to the child. In cases with an increased risk to the child, additional resources will be allocated as deemed appropriate for the specific details of the case.

Jurisdictional conflicts are to be avoided when a child is reported missing. If a missing 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 refuses to take a missing child report, this agency will assume reporting responsibility and work cooperatively with other agencies.

Questions concerning parental custody occasionally arise in relation to missing child reports. MPD officers shall accept the report of a missing child even if custody has not been formally established. Reporting parties will be encouraged to obtain legal custody as soon as possible; however, since the safety of the missing child(ren) is paramount, members of this agency will open a case when it can be shown the child has been removed, without explanation, from his or her usual place of residence. If the court has not established custody, then the law enforcement responsibility is to ensure the child is safe.

Procedure

DEFINITIONS

Missing child cases may fall into one of the below types:

- The **non-family abduction**, in which a child is taken by an unknown individual through force or persuasion, usually in furtherance of additional victimization.
- The **family abduction**, in which a non-custodial family member flees with a child, usually in direct violation of a court-ordered custody arrangement. These cases have proven to be fatal. The child should not be assumed to not be in danger simply because he/she is with a parent.
- The **runaway child**, most often a teenager, who leaves home voluntarily for a variety of reasons.
- The **lost or otherwise missing child**, who becomes separated from parents or caretakers under circumstances not indicating the likelihood of an abduction or voluntary absence. (e.g., cognitively/emotionally disabled, endangered due to medical condition).

As soon as it is verified that the child is missing, an immediate city-wide radio alert to all other patrol units and neighboring law enforcement agencies shall be made. The child shall be entered into NCIC by the primary responding officer, and this entry shall not exceed two hours from the time of original officer dispatch.

Each case represents a unique set of circumstances. It is important for initial responding officers to evaluate a multitude of factors that will help determine the level of risk or danger to a missing child.

RISK FACTORS

Missing children cases that present risk factors indicating a heightened likelihood of danger to the child require an intensive response. The following risk factors or unusual circumstances that may be present include:

- Child is out of the zone of safety for his or her age and developmental stage or physical condition. (examples - a toddler has gone far beyond the boundaries of their yard, an 8-year-old is missing overnight, a child with significant medical needs is missing during a time when they should be receiving medication, etc.).
- Child is developmentally disabled, cognitively disabled or other mental or physiological impairment.
- Child is medically dependent and the dependency is potentially life-threatening.
- Child is in a life-threatening situation.
- Child is absent in a manner inconsistent with established patterns of behavior and the deviation cannot be readily explained.
- Child is with others who could endanger his or her welfare.

If it is determined that **risk factors** are involved in the report of a missing child, an expanded investigation will immediately commence, and the OIC shall be briefed on the situation.

The OIC shall initiate command notification protocols and consult with the Special Victims Unit Lieutenant for potential deployment of specialized resources. The Special Victims Unit Lieutenant will, in consultation with the Captain of the Investigative Services Bureau, determine if the Wisconsin DOJ-DCI CART Team will be requested to mobilize.

The OIC may initiate the review protocol for an AMBER Alert by contacting the Wisconsin State Patrol's Traffic Management Center at **1-844-977-4357 (844-WSP-HELP)**.

Initial Responding Patrol Officers

1. Respond promptly to the scene. Verify that the child is in fact missing by searching the scene; an upset/panicked parent can miss a child.
2. Air a city-wide radio alert to all other patrol units and all neighboring law enforcement agencies that there is a missing child. Provide physical descriptors, clothing description, and the last known location of the child. Request additional units respond to check the immediate area where the child was last seen.
3. Interview the parent(s) or person(s) who made the initial report.
4. Determine when, where, and by whom the missing child was last seen.
5. Interview the individual(s) who last had contact with the missing child.
6. Confirm the child's custody status.
7. Identify the child's zone of safety for his or her age, developmental stage, physical and mental state.
8. Brief street supervisor; make initial determination of the type of incident and determine if K9 response is needed.
9. Brief OIC.
10. Obtain a complete description of the missing child, including photographs (multiple images) and/or video as well as air the last known location.
11. If suspicious circumstances are identified, obtain suspect and vehicle description along with other pertinent information to locate the person.
12. Provide detailed descriptive information to Dane County 911 for broadcast updates.
13. Contact Dane County 911 to enter the child in the NCIC Missing Person File within two hours of the officer's initial dispatch time.
14. Identify and interview everyone at the scene.
15. Secure and safeguard the area (place last seen) as a potential crime scene.
16. Determine if the child has access to an online computer, cellular telephone or other device. Obtain relevant email, online names and passwords.

17. Written reports, original and supplements shall be completed as a priority report prior to the end of the tour. A report must be completed on all missing children even if the missing child returns a short time after they are reported as missing.
18. If missing/runaway child returns, the dispatched officer shall respond in person to verify that the missing child has indeed returned. After verification, the officer shall contact dispatch and cancel the missing status. The return/cancellation must be documented in a report.

Initial Responding Sergeant

1. Obtain a briefing from the responding officers and/or other agency personnel at the scene.
2. Ensure a search of home and place last seen has been conducted.
3. Ensure that K9 resources have been considered for the home and place last seen. For additional resources, contact the OIC to make the request to the K9 supervisor.
4. Notify the OIC to determine if additional personnel and resources are needed to assist in the investigation-such as SVU notification and/or CART activation.
5. Consult with OIC to determine if AMBER Alert is appropriate. See AMBER Alert Protocol at end of document.
6. Establish a field command post (should be an appropriate distance from the residence of the missing child).
7. Determine the size of the perimeter and canvass area.
8. Organize and coordinate the initial canvass/search efforts using a map/grid of the area. Identify potential search areas.
9. Document canvass and/or searched areas.
10. If any suspicious circumstances exist, designate a co-supervisor to supervise perimeter.
11. All persons leaving the inner perimeter should be contacted and identified. All vehicles attempting to leave the inner perimeter should be detained and searched for the missing child.
12. Assign an officer to document all parked vehicles within a reasonable area around the inner perimeter.
13. Conduct initial methodical hasty searches of last known location of child
14. Coordinate exchange of information with the non-scene Command Post that includes the canvass documents, canvass/searched areas, and maps.
15. Brief responding SVU or CART members and/or investigative resources.
16. Direct the staging of media for the District Commander or PIO.
17. Release the canvass/search operation to the designated Search Operations Coordinator.

Officer-In-Charge

1. Assess the need for additional resources, equipment, personnel and/or outside resources.
2. Notify District Command and the Special Victims Unit Lieutenant.
3. Ensure that the required NCIC entry has been made.
4. Include the Missing Child information to the OIC Daily Log in SharePoint for MPD-wide dissemination. This includes runaways.
5. Consider the use of Dane County Emergency Telephone Notification. Designate the geographic area to be notified, preferably bounded by streets or other known geographic landmarks.
6. Consider activation of the non AMBER Alert community notification and/or Wisconsin's AMBER Alert System. See AMBER Alert Protocol at end of document.
7. Contact PIO to facilitate media issues.

Special Victims Unit Lieutenant

1. Assess the need for additional resources, equipment, personnel and/or outside resources.
2. Consult with the Captain of the ISB to determine if the DOJ-DCI CART should be requested.
3. Contact SVU detectives and request they respond to the District Command Post.
4. Establish a command post at the appropriate MPD District Station.
5. Serve as the MPD liaison to the DOJ-DCI CART Commander.

6. Call in and coordinate additional investigative resources as needed.

Investigative Services Captain

1. Determine if DOJ-DCI CART resources should be requested.
2. Contact the Director of the Special Operations Bureau of DCI and request CART mobilization by calling 608-266-1671.
3. Notify the Assistant Chief of Operations of CART mobilization.

Original SOP: 02/25/2015
(Reviewed Only: 01/09/2017, 12/26/2017, 02/04/2022, 02/05/2024)
(Revised: 02/03/2020, 11/24/2025)