

REVISED AND UPDATED

What You Need to Know about Background Screening

A Reference Guide for Youth-Serving
Organizations and their Communities



COPS
Community Oriented Policing Services
U.S. Department of Justice



NATIONAL CENTER FOR
**MISSING &
EXPLOITED**
CHILDREN®

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This project was supported by cooperative agreement number 2019-CK-WX-K001 awarded by the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions contained herein are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice. References to specific agencies, companies, products, or services should not be considered an endorsement by the author(s) or the U.S. Department of Justice. Rather, the references are illustrations to supplement discussion of the issues.

The online references cited in this publication were valid as of the date of this publication. Given that URLs and websites are in constant flux, neither the author(s) nor the COPS Office can vouch for their current validity.

Recommended citation:

National Center for Missing & Exploited Children. 2021. *What You Need to Know about Background Screening: A Reference Guide for Youth-Serving Organizations and their Communities*. Revised and Updated. Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services.

Published 2021

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Letter from the Acting Director of the COPS Office

Dear colleagues:

Protecting children from employees who may mean to do them harm is one of the most important roles youth-serving organizations can serve. Parents and community members trust that the employees and volunteers at their child's school, church, or gymnasium are there to support and guide and, above all, do no harm. Background screening is a vital component to help minimize the risk and protect our nation's most vulnerable assets, our children.

Community members are vital partners to law enforcement regarding this issue, and I am proud to offer this basic guidebook to help educate, inform, and empower youth-serving organizations to help ensure the safety of the children within their care. This guidebook is designed for leaders within a youth-serving organization, community members who volunteer within youth-serving organizations, and parents of children who actively participate in youth-serving organizations. It describes six layers of screening an agency should consider when developing a comprehensive background-screening process. The guidebook offers links to useful tools and resources to help youth-serving agencies understand the best screening practices that are available.

Through the significant work of the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office) is pleased to offer this resource to help youth-serving organizations and community members take an active and informed role in protecting the children in their care.

Sincerely,



Robert E. Chapman
Acting Director
Office of Community Oriented Policing Services

Foreword

Children deserve to grow up in a world where they feel valued and protected in their homes, in the communities where they live, at their schools, and when participating in programs provided by youth-serving organizations (YSO).

Sadly though, children are in fact the most victimized population in our society. Research indicates that a majority of children and youth across the United States will experience at least one type of trauma before adulthood. Some children will experience multiple types of trauma, severely impacting their ability to learn, grow, and develop to their full potential. For example,

- 26 percent of children will witness or experience a traumatic event before age 4;¹
- Nearly 60 percent of youth are exposed to violence or victimization every year—in their homes, their schools, and their communities;²
- 15 percent of youth reported six or more types of direct or witnessed victimization within the past year.³

The single most common protective factor for children who develop resilience against the negative effects of trauma and exposure to violence is the presence of stable and committed relationships with supportive parents, caregivers, or other adults. YSOs provide these critical human connections that promote healing and the prevention of further harm.⁴

Every day across the United States, tens of millions of children and youth participate in a myriad of different programs provided by YSOs. These programs offer them a sense of belonging, opportunities for socioemotional learning, and educational enrichment. In addition, participation in sports and other recreational programming can teach critical life skills and promote physical and mental health and well-being.

At the center of every one of these programs are caring adults.

At the same time, within any YSO there exists the potential that an adult who is trusted to help care for the protection and well-being of a child may have the intent to harm them—physically, emotionally, or sexually—or may lack the capacity to protect them.

No organization is immune to this reality. We all have a responsibility to work to ensure that children in the care of our organizations are protected.

As this guide points out, it is important to understand that no one strategy alone will be effective in protecting children and youth. The key is the development and implementation of a system of youth protection that creates a culture of safety and respect. This ranges from screening and selection to policy development, training, monitoring and supervision,

1. National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention, "Childhood Trauma and Its Effect on Healthy Development," National Center Brief: July 2012, http://www.promoteprevent.org/sites/www.promoteprevent.org/files/resources/childhood%20trauma_brief_in_final.pdf.

2. D. Finkelhor, H.A. Turner, A.M. Shattuck, S.L. Hamby and K. Kracke, "Children's Exposure to Violence, Crime, and Abuse: An Update," OJJDP Juvenile Justice Bulletin: September 2015, <https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh176/files/pubs/248547.pdf>.

3. Finkelhor et al., "Children's Exposure to Violence" (see note 2).

4. National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, *Supportive Relationships and Active Skill-Building Strengthen the Foundations of Resilience: Working Paper No. 13* (Cambridge, MA: 2015), <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/supportive-relationships-and-active-skill-building-strengthen-the-foundations-of-resilience/>.

mandatory reporting, recognizing boundary-violating or rule-breaking behavior, and taking action when potential issues arise. All of these steps provide the best protections for child and youth safety and well-being.

This guide provides critically important, straightforward, and detailed guidance surrounding the very complex issue of protecting the children served within a YSO.

Big Brothers Big Sisters of America is proud to partner with the U.S. Department of Justice Office of Community Oriented Policing Services and the nonprofit organization, the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children®, in the publication of this guide.

Julie Novak

Vice President, Youth Protection

Big Brothers Big Sisters of America

Acknowledgments

The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children® (NCMEC) acknowledges the contribution of the individuals noted below in the design, development, and preparation of this guide. The combined experiences, skills, and expertise of these knowledgeable individuals, along with the suggestions, modifications, and additions provided by expert reviewers, brought this edition of the guide to fruition.

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Special Thanks

Special thanks to Julie Novak from Big Brothers Big Sisters of America for lending thoughtful feedback and voice to this project and Toni Morgan from the COPS Office for steadfast support and guidance throughout this partnership.

Introduction to this Guide

Children in the United States participate in a variety of extracurricular activities, many of which are offered by youth-serving organizations (YSO). According to a 2015 Pew Research Center survey, 73 percent of school-aged children play sports; 60 percent participate in religious instruction or youth groups; and 54 percent have taken lessons in music, dance, or art.⁵ YSOs—such as mentoring programs, sports leagues, scouting, and out-of-school programs—offer support, guidance, skill-building, and growth for those we hold most precious: our children.

It is important to remember that, while most people who choose to work with children do so for the right reasons, some do not. Unfortunately, there are individuals who purposefully seek environments in which they can easily gain access to children for illegitimate purposes and who use the friendliness and benevolence of youth-serving activities, institutions, or organizations to mask their motivations and crimes. In fact, about 90 percent of children who are victims of child sexual abuse know their abuser.⁶

There are valuable steps YSOs can take to vet potential employees and volunteers who will work with children. Those steps include the development of sound child protection policies and background screening practices. While background screening should not be relied on as the sole basis to keep children safer, it also must not be discounted. It is important to note, if an organization fails to implement good vetting policies and a child is harmed, the organization will lose the trust of the community.

YSOs and the community share responsibility for minimizing risk to children and holding individuals accountable for ensuring the safety of children in their care. The purposes of this guide are to emphasize the need for background screening by YSOs and to provide these organizations with the necessary resources to implement background screenings prior to granting access to children in their programs. In addition to background screenings, we must also highlight the importance of ongoing monitoring, supervision, and rescreening of individuals throughout their time with the organization. It is important for organizations themselves, as well as all affiliated agencies (i.e., youth-serving sponsoring organizations or host sites) to take responsibility for ensuring that appropriate child protection practices and strategies, as outlined in the document, are fully implemented.

5. Pew Research Center, *Parenting in America: Outlook, Worries, Aspirations Are Strongly Linked to Financial Situation*, December 17, 2015, http://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2015/12/2015-12-17_parenting-in-america_FINAL.pdf. In addition, among children younger than six years, four in 10 have participated in sports or have been part of an organized playgroup, while one-third have participated in music, dance, or art lessons.

6. D. Finkelhor, *Characteristics of Crimes against Juveniles* (Durham, NH: Crimes against Children Research Center, 2012), http://www.unh.edu/ccrc/pdf/CV26_Revised_Characteristics_of_Crimes_against_Juveniles_5-2-12.pdf.

Getting Started: Child Protection Policies and Practices

While no youth-serving organization (YSO) is immune from risk, identifying and implementing visible proactive and reactive child protection policies sends a clear message to the community that your organization is committed to safeguarding children. Proactive policies include prevention elements such as **background screening** of applicants before they are hired and allowed to work with children, as well as **education** and **training** of employees and volunteers about what child abuse is and how to minimize the opportunity for children to be victimized. This training should also include how to recognize the signs of child abuse⁷ (i.e., child sexual abuse).

Proactive measures include ensuring safe environments, the nature of which will vary depending on the organization's mission and structure—for example, whether it has a physical space (e.g. daycare, schools), multiple sites for activities (e.g. sports, recreation) or undefined sites (e.g. mentoring programs, field trips). Environmental strategies should be considered for all types of sites to allow for a safe environment of the child while in the care of the YSO. Examples of these strategies may include but are not limited to access control to physical spaces and developing off-site activity guidelines and transportation policies for the undefined spaces.⁸

Conducting periodic **self-assessments** or **performance evaluations** of the YSO, its employees, and its volunteers are other examples of proactive measures that should be taken. Reactive policies provide guidance about procedures to follow when a complaint is made or victimization has occurred; they establish processes for **reporting** and responding to abuse and suspicions of abuse.

The establishment, implementation, and enforcement of robust child protection policies and practices are essential elements for reducing the risk of child victimization. To best deter individuals with nefarious motives, an organization should make it abundantly clear to any applicant that it is proactive in taking appropriate measures to protect children, including from child sexual abuse specifically. Publications with sample policies and procedures are noted in the Centers for Disease Control report *Preventing Child Sexual Abuse Within Youth-serving Organizations: Getting Started on Policies and Procedures*.⁹

It is also highly recommended that a YSO be transparent and prepared to answer any questions about its policies and procedures. Such transparency bolsters the organization's credibility and helps foster a healthy environment of accountability with staff and the community, which ultimately provides greater overall safety for the children it serves.

7. Child Welfare Information Gateway, *Mandatory Reporters of Child Abuse and Neglect* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau, 2019), 2, <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/manda.pdf>. ("At the Federal level, the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) has defined child abuse and neglect as 'any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caregiver that results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse, or exploitation, or an act or failure to act that presents an imminent risk of serious harm.'")

8. J. Saul and N.C. Audage, *Preventing Child Sexual Abuse Within Youth-serving Organizations: Getting Started on Policies and Procedures* (Atlanta, Georgia: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2007), 15, <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/PreventingChildSexualAbuse-a.pdf>.

9. Saul and Audage, *Preventing Child Sexual Abuse Within Youth-serving Organizations*, appendix B (see note 8).

There are certain challenges to implementing robust screening policies and practices, especially for smaller YSOs with fewer resources, such as the monetary cost and accessibility of the background check. Finding ways to overcome such challenges to implement and maintain protection policies is imperative, as the real cost of not doing so includes risking the organization's safety, harming the organization's reputation, and most importantly, risking the safety and well-being of the children the organization serves.

Background Screening: Use a Variety of Resources

Background screening may uncover information of concern about an applicant. As such, it is important for organizations to have a written policy regarding how information will be collected, processed, retained, and used to determine an applicant's fitness for a position. Information gathered should be used and applied in a secure, confidential, consistent, and professional manner.

An organization should designate a person or a team who is responsible for receiving, reviewing, and acting on background-screening information, and the person or team must be expected to maintain a high level of confidentiality. Background screening should not be performed only once; policies should instead require screening to be conducted periodically after an individual is hired or brought on as an employee or volunteer.

Assessment criteria, with exact definitions of what information will automatically disqualify an applicant, must be established and shared with applicants in advance. When reviewing an individual's background information pay attention to red flags such as short-lived employment or volunteer periods; inconsistencies in name, date of birth, or Social Security number; and failure to report address history. Organizations may wish to consider the following as factors that could disqualify an applicant:

- Failure to complete the screening process
- History of sexual victimization of children, regardless of whether the individual completed therapy
- Conviction for any crime in which children were involved, regardless of successful completion of probation or incarceration
- History of violence or any sexually exploitative behavior, including acts against adults
- Termination from a paid or volunteer position for misconduct with or involving a child
- Misleading or inconsistent information or explanation about criminal history, such as arrests or convictions

This list is not exhaustive, and an organization may wish to consider additional factors in its screening policy.

In developing its assessment criteria, an organization should ensure their relevance to the organization's needs and type of work the applicant may be performing. Additionally, all hiring decisions should be based upon a complete review of the applicant's qualifications and characteristics. In crafting a screening policy, an organization should also be aware that for screening purposes, different laws apply to employees than to volunteers. For more information about the interaction between background checks and employment laws, please refer to the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's website:

https://www.eeoc.gov/eeoc/publications/background_checks_employers.cfm.

An organization can achieve the goal of a comprehensive background screening program by using a variety of resources, with each component being viewed as an additional layer of protection. With each additional layer, an organization creates a stronger and more robust program.

While no background screening program is foolproof, even with multiple layers of checks, organizations can take additional precautions tailored to the risks of their specific program models.¹⁰ For example, more in-depth screening may need to be employed for programs with a high level of one-on-one contact between adults and children, such as camping programs, mentoring programs, tutoring, individualized instruction, and coaching in sports or the performing arts.

Resources an organization should consider as layers in their background screening programs include the following:

- Nationwide, state, and local criminal history checks
- Jurisdictional (state, tribes, territories, the District of Columbia) and national public sex offender registry websites
- State child abuse and neglect central registries
- Written applications and interviews
- Reference checks

Nationwide and state criminal history checks

An important layer of a comprehensive background screening program is a **criminal history check**. There are essentially two ways to obtain criminal history checks—(1) through law enforcement agencies (state or FBI) or (2) through third-party commercial vendors (background screening companies). Both options have costs associated with them, access different sources of information, and have varying timeframes to receive results.

Criminal history checks conducted through law enforcement agencies are either a nationwide fingerprint-based check or a state fingerprint-based or name-based check. These checks compare an applicant's fingerprints or name, date of birth (DOB), or Social Security number (SSN) if applicable to records in law enforcement systems. A nationwide fingerprint-based check involves a search of the Next Generation Identification (NGI) system maintained by the FBI's Criminal Justice Information Services (CJIS) Division, which can be accessed through state law enforcement agencies. An applicant's fingerprints can also be sent directly to the FBI electronically, as a hard copy through the U.S. mail, or through an FBI-approved Channeler.¹¹ A check through the FBI searches the official state repositories of criminal history information maintained in the NGI system.¹² These records include arrest dates and charges; agency submitting the fingerprints; convictions; juvenile records, if provided by the state; dismissed charges or not guilty verdicts; warrants;¹³ sex offender registry information through the National Sex Offender Registry (NSOR);¹⁴ physical characteristics such as height, weight, hair color, tattoos, and eye color; and aliases. The NGI system is only searchable by law enforcement, government agencies, and organizations given permission to search the system, such as organizations providing care to children. It is not accessible by third-party commercial vendors.

10. Saul and Audage, *Preventing Child Sexual Abuse Within Youth-serving Organizations*, 15 (see note 8)..

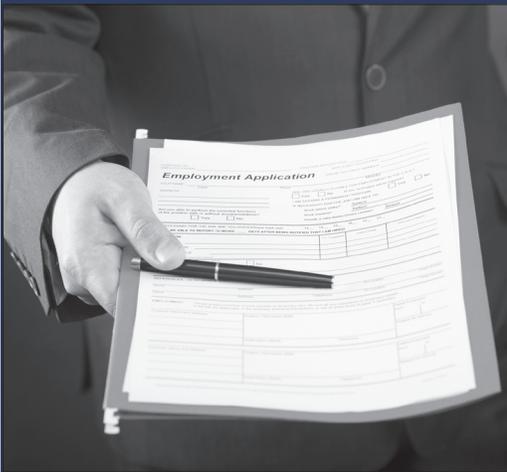
11. For a list of all approved FBI Channelers, visit <https://www.fbi.gov/services/cjis/compact-council/list-of-approved-channelers>. As noted at <https://www.fbi.gov/services/cjis/compact-council/channeler-faqs>, “[a]n FBI-approved Channeler is a contractor that serves as the conduit for submitting fingerprints to the FBI and receiving the FBI criminal history record information (CHRI), on behalf of an Authorized Recipient (AR), for authorized noncriminal justice purposes.”

12. The FBI's Next Generation Identification (NGI) system was developed and implemented to replace the Integrated Automated Fingerprint Identification System (IAFIS). For more information, visit <https://www.fbi.gov/services/cjis/fingerprints-and-other-biometrics/ngi>.

13. U.S. Department of Justice Order 556-73, sec 16.31: Definition of Identification Record, <https://www.fbi.gov/services/cjis/identity-history-summary-checks/us-department-of-justice-order-556-73>.

14. The NSOR is a law enforcement-only national database maintained by the FBI's CJIS Division.

Some states allow access to their criminal history records through either a fingerprint-based check or a name-based check, which requires submission of the applicant's name, date of birth, and SSN if applicable; however, these checks may only include a search of the state where the information was submitted. State laws and regulations govern access to these records, and they vary significantly; therefore, it is important to contact your state identification bureau¹⁵ to determine if these records are accessible when creating background screening policies. For instance, YSOs rely heavily on volunteers to implement programs, and under the Volunteers for Children Act of 1998 – Pub. L. 105-251¹⁶ volunteer organizations serving children, the elderly, and individuals with disabilities are permitted to request criminal history checks through the state regardless of whether the state has passed authorizing legislation. However, it is left to each state's discretion to determine which types of human service organizations should be designated as “qualified entities” able to apply for nationwide criminal history checks through the state agencies. State-specific criminal history check information can be found at <https://childcare.gov/state-resources-home>.¹⁷ If a nationwide search is not an option, then it is important to check every state in which the applicant has resided and consider supplementing the fingerprint-based search with a national search of Fair Credit Reporting Act (FCRA)–governed proprietary data through a third-party commercial vendor (see next section).



Examples of Deceptive Behavior during a Criminal History Check

Among applicants with criminal records studied in NCMEC's Child Safety Pilot (see appendix A),

- **42 percent** had a record in a different state;
- **23 percent** applied with a different name;
- **6 percent** applied with a different date of birth;
- **53.4 percent** indicated they did not have a record, but one was uncovered.

Percentages are based on statistical information from 1,638 applicants who provided additional information to a youth-serving organization during the study period and who had records containing criterion offenses.

Another way to obtain a criminal history check is through a private, third-party commercial vendor. Criminal history checks conducted through these vendors compare an applicant's name, DOB, or SSN if applicable to public court records, state correctional facilities, and state criminal history record repositories. Since these vendors cannot search law enforcement databases, they purchase and compile information from the states and create their own proprietary databases.

15. For a list of all State Identification Bureaus, visit <http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/background-checks/state-identification-bureau-listing>.

16. Full text of the law can be found at <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-112/pdf/STATUTE-112-Pg1870.pdf#page=16>.

17. ChildCare.gov is a partnership between the Office of Child Care and state child care agencies. The information on the ChildCare.gov website is designed to help parents link to their state or territory child care website and search for safe, quality child care by zip code, and to find support services in their community that families need to grow and thrive.

In these types of searches, an applicant's name, date of birth, and SSN if applicable is provided to the vendor, and the vendor provides results in a standardized report. It is important to select a vendor that includes a Social Security trace and to provide an applicant's SSN if possible; this trace enables the vendor to provide a history of the applicant's past and present addresses and any other names associated with the applicant's SSN, including aliases. Private vendors return the results rather quickly; however, not all states' criminal history information is available in commercial databases, even if the vendor's report says it is a nationwide check. Therefore, it is important to inquire about the specific sources of the vendor's information, and to make sure that it includes multistate and county criminal records.

It is also important for organizations to speak to legal counsel when developing screening protocols, as there are certain legal requirements that organizations must meet to protect individuals' privacy rights and ensure proper use of their personal information, including FCRA and state consumer reporting laws.¹⁸

Both types of criminal history checks have their advantages and disadvantages, such as the timeframe in which results are received, cost, and accessibility; and, since both access different sources of information, their results can vary. To minimize the challenges inherent to both types of searches, it is therefore recommended that an organization use a combination of these resources, when possible, for the most robust criminal history check.

It is important to keep in mind that individuals who have been arrested may not have been charged with a crime. For instance, when a case is dismissed, it means the court or prosecutor decided the charge should not go forward and the case was therefore terminated. Depending on the source of the information, that arrest may or may not show up on an individual's criminal record. It is also important to keep in mind there are people who abuse children who have never been arrested, and so their criminal history checks will result in no criminal record. This is yet another reason for a multi-layer approach to a comprehensive background screening program.

Jurisdictional (state, tribal, territorial, District of Columbia, and national) public sex offender registry websites

Another layer of a comprehensive and thorough background screening process involves searching jurisdictional (state, tribes, territories, and the District of Columbia) and national public sex offender registry websites. The Dru Sjodin National Sex Offender Public Website (NSOPW) links public state, territorial, and tribal sex offender registry websites in one national search site. Each jurisdiction also has its own public sex offender registry website, which contains sex offender data that is free and searchable by the public. A search of the Dru Sjodin NSOPW and jurisdictional public sex offender registry websites may help identify registered sex offenders who are trying to gain access to children. *It is important to search both the national website and the websites in every jurisdiction in which the applicant has worked or resided to verify search results.*

18. For more information, consult the Federal Trade Commission's October 2016 report "Using Consumer Reports: What Employers Need to Know": <https://www.ftc.gov/tips-advice/business-center/guidance/using-consumer-reports-what-employers-need-know>.

Although sex offenders are required to provide a large amount of personal data, the NSOPW and most jurisdictional registries only make a limited amount of information public. The publicly available information can also vary by jurisdiction. Public sex offender data may include the following:

- Personal information, such as name and any aliases, age, physical description, and current photos
- Home address, work address, and employment status
- Convictions, jurisdiction of convictions, dates of convictions, relevant state statutes, and age of victim(s), if known

Additional details may be obtained from the court. Adult court records are public information unless sealed by court order.¹⁹

NOTE: Not all registered sex offenders are on the NSOPW. The NSOPW website (www.NSOPW.gov) is maintained by the U.S. Department of Justice and links to participating public registries to allow the public to conduct nationwide searches. NSOPW only returns search results based on what is publicly made available by each jurisdiction's public registry website. Jurisdictional laws dictate what information and which offenders are made public. For example, it is possible someone who committed a qualifying sex offense will come up on a fingerprint check²⁰ but will *not* be listed on the public registry website because of the requirements of the state.²¹

State child abuse and neglect central registries

Another element of a comprehensive background screening process includes review of **state child abuse and neglect central registries**. Most states have laws authorizing a statewide child abuse and neglect central registry—a centralized listing of child maltreatment records that contains information related to child abuse and neglect investigations conducted by state social services agencies. Unlike public sex offender registries, access to child abuse and neglect registries is more restricted; however, many YSOs may request to have this information searched. Criteria for obtaining child abuse and neglect information varies by state.

An organization may search these registries when screening applicants for specific types of employment or volunteer activities in which the applicants will have contact with children, including in childcare institutions, schools, and court-appointed special advocate programs, as well as for foster parent licensing, adoption approval, and assessment of custody petitions.

Information contained in each registry varies by state—some limit the information to only substantiated reports of abuse, while other states include all reports made and investigated, even if the reports were determined to be unsubstantiated. Sometimes, information gleaned in a civil court case will be entered in child abuse registries. For instance, if a civil court found there was enough evidence someone abused a child during a protection order proceeding, that finding would be entered in the child abuse registry. This is particularly important because many child

19. Links to all public state, territorial, and tribal sex offender registry websites can be found by visiting the "Registry Sites" web page, <https://www.nsopw.gov/en/Registry/AllRegistries>.

20. As noted earlier, a fingerprint check will return information maintained in the FBI's NGI system, which includes information from the National Sex Offender Registry (NSOR) (see note 5).

21. If you have questions about the NSOPW, contact the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Sex Offender Sentencing, Monitoring, Apprehending, Registering, and Tracking via <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/smart/>.

abuse cases, especially child sexual abuse cases, are not successfully prosecuted in criminal court.²² Therefore, it is important for organizations to check the information contained in child abuse registries, since a finding of abuse in a civil case would be relevant for a YSOs to take into consideration. Unfortunately, a national child abuse registry does not currently exist and, as a result, individuals must be checked on a state-by-state basis. Most child abuse registries charge a fee for processing the request.²³

Written applications and interviews

Written applications and in-person, phone, or virtual **interviews** can both provide organizations with valuable information about applicants. A written application enables an organization to assess the background and interests of an applicant; it should include questions that determine whether an applicant has mature, adult relationships as well as clear boundaries and ethical standards for their conduct with children.²⁴ The application gives an opportunity for the organization to determine how truthful the applicant is and to discover any discrepancies in the information they have provided. For example, if the applicant lists one date of birth on their application and a different date of birth is uncovered during the criminal history check, the reason for this discrepancy needs to be explored. If the applicant intended to deceive, they should be considered untrustworthy.

The organization can verify any information provided on the application during a subsequent interview. An interview allows the organization to speak directly with an applicant and ask behavior-based questions, which can illustrate how an applicant communicates and what information they may be willing to share about themselves. Asking open-ended questions encourages discussion and will help an organization identify potential areas of concern that may require additional follow-up. Some examples of questions to be used when interviewing applicants for positions with access to children are available through the Nonprofit Risk Management Center.²⁵

Reference checks

Organizations should also consider checking an applicant's references. **Reference checks** can provide additional information about an applicant and help verify previous volunteer and work experience. They also allow for corroboration of information obtained from an applicant during the interview and may help an organization identify discrepancies. In addition to contacting references listed by the applicant, an organization should also consider asking references if they can recommend others who know the applicant, but who are not already listed on the application.

Organizations should ask specific questions about the applicant's suitability to work with children and document their answers. Examples of questions to ask references during a reference check of an applicant are noted in *Preventing Child Sexual Abuse Within Youth-serving Organizations: Getting Started on Policies and Procedures*.²⁶

22. There are a variety of reasons why this may happen, including a lack of evidence or a child victim or witness's inability to testify at trial.

23. For a list of state child abuse and neglect registries, visit <https://www.adoptuskids.org/for-professionals/interstate-adoptions/state-child-abuse-registries>.

24. Saul and Audage, *Preventing Child Sexual Abuse Within Youth-serving Organizations*, 5 (see note 8).

25. John C. Patterson, *Staff Screening Tool Kit, Third Edition* (Washington, DC: Nonprofit Risk Management, 2004), 61, <https://www.nationalservice.gov/sites/default/files/resource/r3300-staff-screening-tool-kit.pdf>.

26. Saul and Audage, *Preventing Child Sexual Abuse Within Youth-serving Organizations*, 7 (see note 8).

Other Critical Risk Management Strategies in Serving Children and Youth

Ongoing monitoring and supervision

It is critically important for an organization to **monitor** individual employees' and volunteers' behaviors on an ongoing basis to ascertain whether their interactions with youth are appropriate, respectful, and in keeping with the organization's code of conduct and safety-related policies. Observations may come from youth themselves, parents, professional staff, or even bystanders. The sidebar gives some early warning signs of problematic or potentially abusive behavior.



Behaviors to Watch for When Adults Are with Children

Personal space

“Personal space” is the private area of control inside an imaginary line or boundary that defines each person as separate. Ideally, that boundary helps us stay in charge of our own personal space. People who routinely disrespect or ignore boundaries increase children’s risk for sexual abuse. Pay attention and monitor when an adult

- refuses to let a child set their own limits (e.g., by providing personal care beyond what the child needs);
- misses or ignores cues about personal limits or boundaries (e.g., by not adjusting treatment or behavior);
- ignores a child’s need for and right to privacy.

Relationships with children

Some people who sexually abuse children seem to be overly focused on or spend all of their time with children. Pay attention and monitor more closely when an adult

- spends significant time with children and shows little interest in spending time with peers;
- treats children more like peers by sharing personal or private information or allowing children or teens to get away with inappropriate behavior;
- has a “special” child friend, maybe a different one from year to year;
- seems “too good to be true” (e.g., frequently babysits different children for free; takes children on special outings alone; buys children gifts or gives them money for no apparent reason).

Inappropriate behavior

Some people are unclear about what is appropriate with children and therefore engage in inappropriate behaviors around children. Be prepared to intervene when an adult

- insists on or manages to spend uninterrupted time alone with a child;
- encourages silence and secrets in children;
- makes sexually explicit comments or jokes around children, points out sexual images, or describes children using sexual words like “stud” or “sexy;”
- is overly interested in the sexuality or sexual development of a particular child or teen (e.g., talks about a child’s developing body or makes fun of children’s body parts).

Source: *Tip Sheet: Behaviors to Watch for When Adults Are With Children*, Stop It Now!, accessed May 3, 2020, <https://www.stopitnow.org/adult-behaviors-to-watch>. For additional use information, visit <https://www.stopitnow.org/terms-of-use> and <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/us/>. Use of this information in no way suggests Stop It Now! endorses this guide.

Keep in mind, however, that individuals who pose a possible threat to children and individuals who have healthy relationships with children may share similar characteristics. Therefore, organizations are urged to use caution and sound judgment when observing an individual's behavior.

Ongoing monitoring and supervision of employees and volunteers should include self-assessments and performance evaluations; these assessments should be done for the organization as a whole, as well. Adding questions about interaction with children and youth to yearly performance reviews ensures this observation takes place throughout an individual's involvement with the organization and not just during the hiring process. If any behaviors, actions, or statements are found that give an organization pause, even after an employee or volunteer has passed hiring screenings, they should not be ignored: while they may not necessarily indicate a problem with the individual, they still warrant further observation or inquiry.

For example, an individual may engage in seemingly innocuous boundary violations, such as paying special attention or giving preference to a child. While these behaviors may seem benign, they should immediately be corrected and documented. Individuals who may pose a threat to a child's safety or well-being often press boundaries and break rules, but are rarely caught in the act of physically or sexually abusing a child. If an organization witnesses an individual crossing a boundary, the organization should address the inappropriate behavior or boundary violation with the individual²⁷ and document the occurrence. In addition, it is important to have a mechanism in place for young people, parents, and caregivers to report disclosed or suspected inappropriate behavior to the YSO and law enforcement. Part of the process of having this mechanism in place is proactively making sure everyone is aware of it prior to needing to use it.

It is important to remember that most individuals who try to gain access to children to victimize them have no criminal record. Therefore, it is extremely important that the background screening process include screening and observation mechanisms beyond the criminal background check, such as conducting interviews, checking references, and supervising the individual as they interact with children.

Education and training

Other components of proactive child protection policies include **education and training**. An organization's employees and volunteers are the eyes and ears of the organization; it is extremely important that they know the organization's child protection and reporting policies. By providing them with the tools to recognize, and identify indicators of, child abuse, they can assist in identifying and reporting inappropriate behavior.

27. "Grooming and Red Flag Behaviors," Darkness To Light, accessed October 16, 2020, <https://www.d2l.org/child-grooming-signs-behavior-awareness/>.

An organization should establish a code of conduct that is posted prominently in areas where the staff, volunteers, program participants, and the public can see it. Doing so provides two main benefits. First, it displays an organization's transparency and demonstrates the organization's commitment to child safety and, in turn, helps serve as a deterrent to applicants who are only seeking to work or volunteer at the organization to victimize children. Second, by requiring all employees and volunteers to sign and acknowledge receipt of a code of conduct, it helps ensure everyone is aware of the organization's rules and helps an organization set expectations for child safety. The code should also include detailed information about how an individual can report any concerning behaviors. Regularly reinforcing these policies through training, online or in person, can help prevent future or ongoing instances of child victimization.

Reporting

Organizations must repeatedly reinforce that it is every person's responsibility to make sure any harm against a child is **reported**. The Federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) requires each state to have provisions or procedures for requiring certain individuals to report known or suspected instances of child abuse and neglect.²⁸ These individuals are referred to as mandatory reporters.

If inappropriate behavior is observed, or if there is reason to believe something inappropriate has occurred, *do not assume* someone else will report it.

- If an incident of sexual exploitation, sexual contact, sexual abuse, or physical abuse has been observed, or there is reason to believe it occurred, *report this information directly to law enforcement or the local child protective services.*
- If suspicious or concerning behavior is observed, *report this information directly to the organization's leadership and to law enforcement or the local child protective services.*

Please see appendix C for a detailed list of specific state mandatory reporter laws and additional reporting resources.

Incidents of child sexual exploitation can also be reported to the NCMEC's CyberTipline® at <http://www.missingkids.org/gethelpnow/cybertipline>.

28. Child Welfare Information Gateway, *Mandatory Reporters of Child Abuse*, 1 (see note 7).

Conclusion

Ideally, criminal history checks for background screenings should be nationwide in scope, timely, and provided at minimal cost. Yet, while systems have improved over the years, there is still no comprehensive national screening resource currently available meeting these criteria. It can be difficult for non-law enforcement entities to conduct and analyze criminal history checks, and access to child abuse registries is limited. Despite these limitations, the responsibility still rests with youth-serving organizations (YSO) to understand what best practices in screening are available, identify sources of information, and be as diligent and thorough as possible to protect the children in their care.

A comprehensive screening program includes training, reporting procedures, criminal history checks, interviews, and reference checks. Whatever combination of sources is used, it is important to know what each search provides, and to take the time to understand the content and quality of the searches being run.

The most thorough and comprehensive of background checks will not eliminate the risk of harm to children and should not be viewed as the universal assurance of child protection. Organizational policies must prohibit inappropriate practices and mandate reporting of any form of abuse. While background screening is an important first step, it will never alone be enough to protect children from all harm. It is up to parents, caregivers, and YSOs to get involved, be aware, and implement sound child protection and screening practices to help keep children safer. All adults must take informed, proactive measures to protect children. By using the resources in this guide, together, YSOs and their communities can create and maintain a strong nurturing environment in which all children can succeed and thrive.

Appendix A. Child Safety Pilot Program Description and Findings

The Child Safety Pilot Program was established by the Prosecutorial Remedies and Other Tools to end the Exploitation of Children Today (PROTECT) Act of 2003. The Child Safety Pilot Program addressed the question of what kind of criminal history checks will help youth-serving organizations better protect the children in their care. During its operation from 2003 to 2011, the Child Safety Pilot Program conducted more than 100,000 criminal history checks. Under the pilot program, the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children® (NCMEC) was tasked with providing fitness determinations for applicants wishing to volunteer to work with children at nonprofit youth-serving organizations. These fitness determinations were based on the results of nationwide fingerprint-based criminal history checks from the FBI. NCMEC made fitness determinations based on criteria it established along with the original three organizations participating in the program: MENTORING (formerly known as the National Mentoring Partnership), the Boys & Girls Clubs of America, and the National Council of Youth Sports.



Child Safety Pilot Program Criterion Offenses

- Any felony conviction (or crime punishable by confinement greater than one year)
- Any lesser crime using force or threat of force against a person
- Any lesser crime in which sexual relations is an element, including “victimless” crimes of sexual abuse
- Any lesser crime involving controlled substances (not paraphernalia or alcohol)
- Any lesser crime involving cruelty to animals

Each determination fits into one of three categories: (1) meets criteria, (2) does not meet criteria, or (3) may not meet criteria / unable to determine. Once this determination was made, NCMEC sent it to the submitting organization for its consideration in examining the candidate’s application to volunteer. Every applicant had a right to appeal to the FBI and obtain a copy of their criminal history.

Information from the pilot program demonstrated that some people who intend to victimize children will try to obtain legitimate access to them, despite a national fingerprint-based criminal history check. Some applicants had criminal histories including homicides, sexual assaults, child endangerment, abuse and neglect of a child, and rape, as well as registration as a sex offender. Within a subset of applicants who had criminal records and applied to volunteer at the nonprofit organizations: 42 percent of applicants had a criminal record in a state other

than where they applied to volunteer, 23 percent of applicants had a different name on their criminal record than the one used to apply to volunteer, and 6 percent of applicants applied with a different date of birth than the one in their criminal history.

Equally concerning, more than half of applicants who indicated they did not have a criminal record did, in fact, have one.

The pilot program demonstrated the need for a permanent background-check program to provide criminal-history checks to youth-serving organizations. Such a program should provide nationwide checks at little or no cost, returning the results to these organizations in a timely manner.

Appendix B. Pertinent Federal Laws and Regulations

Child Protection Improvements Act – Pub. L. 115-141

The Child Protection Improvements Act (CPIA) passed as part of the Consolidated Appropriations Act in 2018 and amended the National Child Protection Act of 1993 (34 U.S.C. § 40101). The CPIA established a permanent background-check system for organizations seeking to screen employees and volunteers working with vulnerable populations, including children, the elderly, and individuals with disabilities.

Full Text of Law: <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PLAW-115publ141/html/PLAW-115publ141.htm>

Fair Credit Reporting Act – 15 U.S.C. § 1681

The Fair Credit Reporting Act (FCRA) regulates how credit reporting agencies can collect, access, use, and share data they collect on consumers and helps promote the accuracy, fairness, and privacy of information in consumer reporting agencies' files. It also provides consumers with several rights and protections, including the right to be told if information in their file has been used against them, the right to know what is in their file, and the right to ask for their credit score.

Full Text of Law: <https://www.ftc.gov/enforcement/statutes/fair-credit-reporting-act>

Federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) – Pub. L. 93-247

The Federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA), originally enacted on January 31, 1974 (P.L. 93-247), was last reauthorized on December 20, 2010, by the CAPTA Reauthorization Act of 2010 (P.L. 111-320). It was amended in 2015, 2016, and 2018; most recently, certain provisions were amended by the Victims of Child Abuse Act Reauthorization Act of 2018 (P.L. 115-424). This federal legislation sets forth a federal definition of child abuse and neglect, provides federal funding and guidance to states in support of prevention, assessment, investigation, prosecution, and treatment activities, and also provides grants to public agencies and nonprofit organizations, including Indian tribes and tribal organizations, for demonstration programs and projects.

Full text of Law: <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/USCODE-2017-title42/html/USCODE-2017-title42-chap67.htm>

Protecting Young Victims from Sexual Abuse and Safe Sport Authorization Act of 2017 – Pub. L. 115-126

The U.S. Congress designated the U.S. Center for SafeSport with the authority to respond to reports of sexual misconduct within the U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Movement by passing the Protecting Young Victims from Sexual Abuse and Safe Sport Authorization Act of 2017. The Center opened its doors in Denver, Colorado, in March 2017, and soon after became federally authorized under the Protecting Young Victims from Sexual Abuse and Safe Sport Authorization Act of 2017 (which became Pub. L. 115-126 on February 14, 2018). Under this law, the Center developed resources and policies to safeguard athletes from bullying, harassment,

hazing, physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, and sexual misconduct. The law entrusts the center with the exclusive authority to respond to reports of allegations of sexual abuse and sexual misconduct within the United States Olympic & Paralympic Committee and their recognized National Governing Bodies (NGBs).

Full Text of Law: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/senate-bill/534/text>

U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission

The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) enforces civil rights laws that protect applicants and employees from workplace discrimination. Under federal law, it is illegal to check the background of applicants and employees when that decision is based on a person's race, national origin, color, sex, religion, disability, genetic information, or age. Additional information is available at https://www.eeoc.gov/eeoc/publications/background_checks_employers.cfm.

Volunteers for Children Act of 1998 – Pub. L. 105-251

The Volunteers for Children Act (VCA) amended the National Child Protection Act of 1993 to authorize youth-serving nonprofit organizations and institutions, in the absence of state procedures requiring qualified entities designated by the state to contact an authorized state agency, to request a nationwide background check, including a check of fingerprint records, even if the entity's state had not passed implementing legislation requiring that background checks be performed. Volunteer organizations serving children, the elderly, and individuals with disabilities are now allowed to request background checks regardless of whether the state has passed authorizing legislation. However, it is left to each state's discretion to determine which types of human service organizations should be designated as "qualified entities" able to apply for nationwide background checks through the state agencies.

Full Text of Law: <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-112/pdf/STATUTE-112-Pg1870.pdf#page=16>

Appendix C. Mandatory Reporting Laws

Every state requires certain people report child maltreatment to the authorities. Mandated reporters often include law enforcement, childcare providers, social workers, teachers, and medical and mental health professionals. Each state sets out a reporting process that applies to *all* mandated reporters. Additionally, some states have expanded their list of mandated reporters to include *all* people who suspect child abuse or neglect, not just those in a specific profession. In approximately 18 states and Puerto Rico, any person who suspects child abuse or neglect is required to report.

To determine if you or your youth-serving organization is required to report suspected cases of child abuse or neglect, please find your state statute at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services website, <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/state>:

- Identify your state in Step 1
- Under Step 2, “Select a Topic(s)” - place a check mark next to “Mandatory Reporters of Child Abuse and Neglect” within the “Child Abuse and Neglect” category
- Click “Go!” under Step 3, “Begin Your Search”

A fact sheet on state-specific mandatory reporters can be found at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/manda.pdf>.

Additional resources for reporting child sexual abuse can be found at <https://www.stopitnow.org/ohc-content/reporting-child-sexual-abuse>.

Appendix D. Recommended Questions Caregivers Should Ask about Child Protection Policies

Safeguarding

- Are there policies in place, such as more intensive screening requirements, requirements that activities be observable or interruptible, requirements for increased parental engagement, or required professional staff monitoring and supervision strategies, specifically addressing any programmatic elements where an adult or older child may be alone with another child?
- Are there policies prohibiting employees and volunteers from giving gifts to children?
- Are there policies prohibiting employees and volunteers from privately contacting children online or virtually, unless a parent or guardian is copied?

Screening

- Are criminal history checks performed on all employees and volunteers who have access to children?
- Who provides the organization's background checks?
- Do you conduct nationwide background checks, statewide background checks, or both?
- Are reference checks performed on applicants?
- What would disqualify a person from being hired or from being able to volunteer?
- Do you re-screen employees and volunteers after they are hired, and, if so, how often?
- Who is responsible for conducting background screenings and background checks, and what training have they received?

Training

- Do employees, volunteers, and parents receive training about how to prevent, identify, and report child abuse? Are they provided with information about how to report concerns internally and through the appropriate organizational process?
- Do employees and volunteers receive training, in accordance with best practices and organizational policies, about what constitutes appropriate contact with children?
- Do employees and volunteers receive training about mandatory reporting laws?

Reporting

- If an employee or volunteer suspects, witnesses, or receives a report regarding inappropriate contact or behavior with a child, does the organization have a policy in place that provides guidance about how, and to whom, to report such an incident both within and outside the organization?
- If so, are all employees and volunteers who have knowledge of such suspected inappropriate contact or behavior required to report the incident or behavior?
- Who at the organization is responsible for investigating reports of suspected inappropriate contact or behavior and for reporting criminal behavior to law enforcement?

Appendix E. Resources

Organizations and websites

ChildCare.Gov

A website supported by the Office of Child Care (OCC) that provides multiple areas of child-care information, as well as state specific laws and childcare requirements.

<https://childcare.gov/state-resources-home>

Dru Sjodin National Sex Offender Public Website

www.nsopw.gov/

Federal Bureau of Investigation's Listing of State Identification Bureaus

<http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/background-checks/state-identification-bureau-listing>.

National Center for Missing & Exploited Children® CyberTipline®

<http://www.missingkids.org/gethelpnow/cybertipline>

Professional Background Screening Association

<https://thepbsa.org/>

State-by-state search for laws and policies on background screening

<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/state>

U.S. Center for SafeSport

The U.S. Center for SafeSport is an independent 501c(3) non-profit organization focused on ending all forms of abuse in sport. Its mission is to make athlete well-being the centerpiece of the nation's sports culture through abuse prevention, education, and accountability.

<https://uscenterforsafesport.org/>

U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Sex Offender Sentencing, Monitoring, Apprehending, Registering, and Tracking (SMART)

<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/smart/>

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About the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children®

The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) is a private, nonprofit 501(c)(3) corporation whose mission is to help find missing children, reduce child sexual exploitation, and prevent child victimization. NCMEC works with families, victims, private industry, law enforcement, and the public to assist with preventing child abductions, recovering missing children, and providing services to deter and combat child sexual exploitation.

From its establishment in 1984 through 2020, NCMEC's national toll-free hotline, 1-800-THE-LOST® (1-800-843-5678), has received more than five million calls. NCMEC has worked with corporate partners to circulate billions of photos of missing children; assisted families and professionals in the field with the recovery of more than 348,000 missing children; and facilitated training for more than 379,000 law enforcement, criminal/juvenile justice, and healthcare professionals. NCMEC's Team HOPE volunteers have provided resources and emotional support to more than 76,000 families of missing and exploited children.

About the COPS Office

The **Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office)** is the component of the U.S. Department of Justice responsible for advancing the practice of community policing by the nation's state, local, territorial, and tribal law enforcement agencies through information and grant resources.

Community policing begins with a commitment to building trust and mutual respect between police and communities. It supports public safety by encouraging all stakeholders to work together to address our nation's crime challenges. When police and communities collaborate, they more effectively address underlying issues, change negative behavioral patterns, and allocate resources.

Rather than simply responding to crime, community policing focuses on preventing it through strategic problem-solving approaches based on collaboration. The COPS Office awards grants to hire community policing officers and support the development and testing of innovative policing strategies. COPS Office funding also provides training and technical assistance to community members and local government leaders, as well as all levels of law enforcement.

Since 1994, the COPS Office has invested more than \$14 billion to add community policing officers to the nation's streets, enhance crime fighting technology, support crime prevention initiatives, and provide training and technical assistance to help advance community policing. Other achievements include the following:

- To date, the COPS Office has funded the hiring of approximately 130,000 additional officers by more than 13,000 of the nation's 18,000 law enforcement agencies in both small and large jurisdictions.
- Nearly 700,000 law enforcement personnel, community members, and government leaders have been trained through COPS Office-funded training organizations and the COPS Training Portal.
- Almost 500 agencies have received customized advice and peer-led technical assistance through the COPS Office Collaborative Reform Initiative Technical Assistance Center.
- To date, the COPS Office has distributed more than eight million topic-specific publications, training curricula, white papers, and resource CDs and flash drives.
- The COPS Office also sponsors conferences, round tables, and other forums focused on issues critical to law enforcement.

COPS Office information resources, covering a wide range of community policing topics such as school and campus safety, violent crime, and officer safety and wellness, can be downloaded via the COPS Office's home page, <https://cops.usdoj.gov>.

Youth-serving organizations have the fundamental duty to protect the children within their care. *What You Need to Know about Background Screening* is a simple yet powerful resource from the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children® dedicated to helping youth-serving organizations by providing information on how to better screen employees and minimize the risk to the children they serve. This guidebook, thoroughly updated in 2021 with new information and research, describes the layers of screening an agency should consider when developing a comprehensive background-screening process and offers links to useful tools and resources to help youth-serving agencies understand the best screening practices that are available.



COPS

Community Oriented Policing Services
U.S. Department of Justice

U.S. Department of Justice
Office of Community Oriented Policing Services
145 N Street, NE
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To obtain details on COPS Office programs,
call the COPS Office Response Center at 800-421-6770.

Visit COPS Office online at cops.usdoj.gov.



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Contact NCMEC at 703-224-2150
or report information about a missing or
exploited child at 1-800-THE-LOST (1-800-843-5678).

Visit NCMEC online at www.missingkids.org.