

Montana Department of Justice Office of the Child and Family Ombudsman Missing Foster Youth: A Systemic Brief



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INTRODUCTION

In 2014, the Montana Department of Justice: Office of Child and Family Ombudsman began responding to citizen requests to review and investigate specific Department of Public Health and Human Services: Child and Family Services Division actions or omissions in response to child abuse reports. Between 2014 and July 2024, the Office of Child and Family Ombudsman responded to 2,768 citizens and completed a total of 1,061 case reviews and investigations. During that period, the Office of Child and Family Ombudsman collected a tremendous amount of data and flagged cases with similarities. As a result, the Office of Child and Family Ombudsman and its partners have identified statewide trends in the child welfare system.

THE ISSUE

Under federal law, all state child welfare agencies must submit a report to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children when a child under their care goes missing. They also are required to notify local law enforcement jurisdiction, who then report missing foster youth to the National Crime Information Center.

Foster youth often go missing more than once during their time in foster care. The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children report found that about 40% of foster youth who were reported missing, went missing multiple times.¹ On average, they went missing four times while in the state's care.

Pursuant to [MCA 41-3-209 \(b\)](#) the Office of the Child and Family Ombudsman receives reports on the Missing Youth who are the custody of the state's child protection agency. A staff member from the Montana Child Abuse Hotline sends notifications of the missing youth to the "DOJ Missing" email group. The DOJ Missing email group includes the DOJ Missing Person Specialist, the Montana Analysis and Technical Information Center, and the Office of the Child and Family Ombudsman. The email group allows for efficient communication, including the sharing of social media information, pictures, and any law enforcement updates. Upon receiving notification, the Ombudsman's office records all data regarding the missing youth. The office gathers data on the child's date of birth, date of last contact, date of notification, county of residence, ethnicity and any previous missing reports.

OUTCOME

Beginning in 2022, the Ombudsman's office began facilitating a monthly meeting between the DOJ Missing Person's Specialist and the Bureau Chief of Montana's Child Abuse Hotline. Prior to these meetings, a lack of interagency communication led to an inflated number of youths in foster care on the Montana Missing Person's Database. The public database can be seen [here](#). Many of these youth were already returned and safe but had remained on the online public missing database due to lack of coordination at the community level. This procedural issue with local law enforcement and local Child Protection Specialists caused regular miscommunication.

¹ Analysis of children missing from care reported to NCMEC 2013-2022, [pdf](#).

One entity may know the whereabouts of the missing youth without appropriately alerting the other entity. The Ombudsman's office became the connecting piece for the entities at state level. This endeavor has resulted in zero missing foster care youth for the month of February 2024 (see graphs on page 4).

The Office of the Child and Family Ombudsman crosschecks the reported Missing Youth with the Montana Missing Persons Database to prepare for these meetings. This list includes those already reported to the Ombudsman's office from Child Abuse Hotline staff. After review, the list of missing youth receiving services is sent to child welfare administrators for further follow up. Through these meetings, youths are removed from the Montana Missing Person's Database. The meeting, hosted by the Office of Child and Family Ombudsman, provides a facilitated venue for the Child Abuse Hotline staff and the DOJ Missing Persons Specialist to discuss any foster youth who are actively missing. The monthly meeting creates a platform for the departments to share information regarding the missing foster youth, leading to a more supportive and comprehensive search and recovery.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation #1: The Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services direct the Child and Family Services Division to continue attending the monthly meetings with the Office of Child and Family Ombudsman and the DOJ Missing Person Specialist.

Rationale #1: The Child and Family Services Division has designated staff within the Child Abuse Hotline to attend each meeting. The attendance of Child and Family Services staff would further bolster practices and help locate foster youth faster.

Recommendation #2: The Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services direct the Child and Family Services Division to include the monthly meeting in the procedure *Reporting Montana Missing or Runaway Foster Youth*.

Rationale #2: With the meeting solidified in procedure, it will ensure the meetings continue regardless of staff changes or turnover. This meeting also aligns with the overall mission of Child and Family Services that establishes the importance of safety for children involved with the foster care system.

CONCLUSION

Overall, children and youth who go missing from the foster care system in Montana are located quickly. Pursuant to MCA 41-3-209(b), the Office of Child and Family Ombudsman will continue to collect data related to missing youth. The Office of Child and Family Ombudsman remains committed to facilitating the monthly virtual meeting to locate foster youth missing from their placement.

APPENDIX: DATA AND GRAPHS

Month	Total number of foster children in State of Montana's care	Total number of individual foster children who have been reported missing	Total number of foster children located	Total number of missing foster children reports
January	2559	8 (0.31%)	8	9
February	2516	11 (0.44%)	11	12
March	2530	8 (0.32%)	8	12
April	2513	10 (0.40%)	10	15
May	2527	12 (0.47%)	12	17
June	2456	7 (0.29%)	7	11
July	2368	9 (0.38%)	9	15
August	2312	5 (0.22%)	5	8
September	2297	2 (0.09%)	2	5
October	2211	5 (0.23%)	5	10
November	2178	10 (0.46%)	9*	12
December	2140	1 (0.05%)	1	3

2023 CFSD Monthly Missing Youth Data

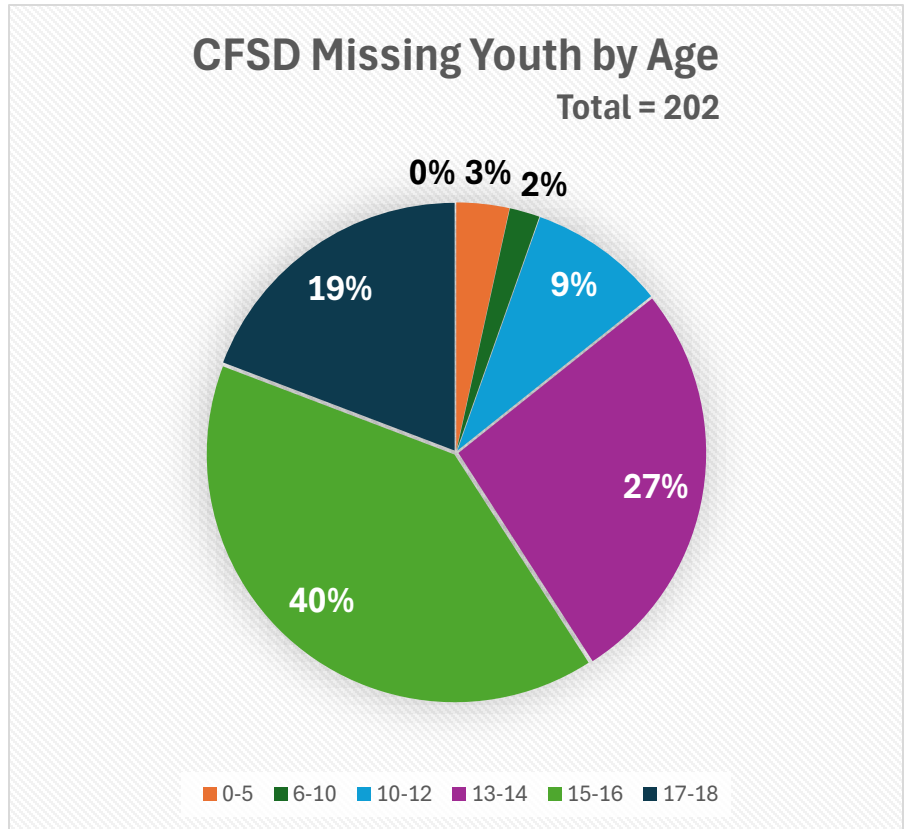
*Only one foster child remained on the missing clearinghouse at end of 2023. This child was located in January 2024

Month	Total number of foster children in State of Montana's care	Total number of individual foster children who have been reported missing	Total number of foster children located	Total number of missing foster children reports
January	2151	9 (0.42%)	9	10
February	2164	0 (0.00%)	0	0
March	2161	9 (0.42%)	9	10
April	2142	9 (0.42%)	9	9
May	2172	8 (0.37%)	7**	9
June	2183	10 (0.46%)	10	11
July	2188	3 (0.14%)	3	3

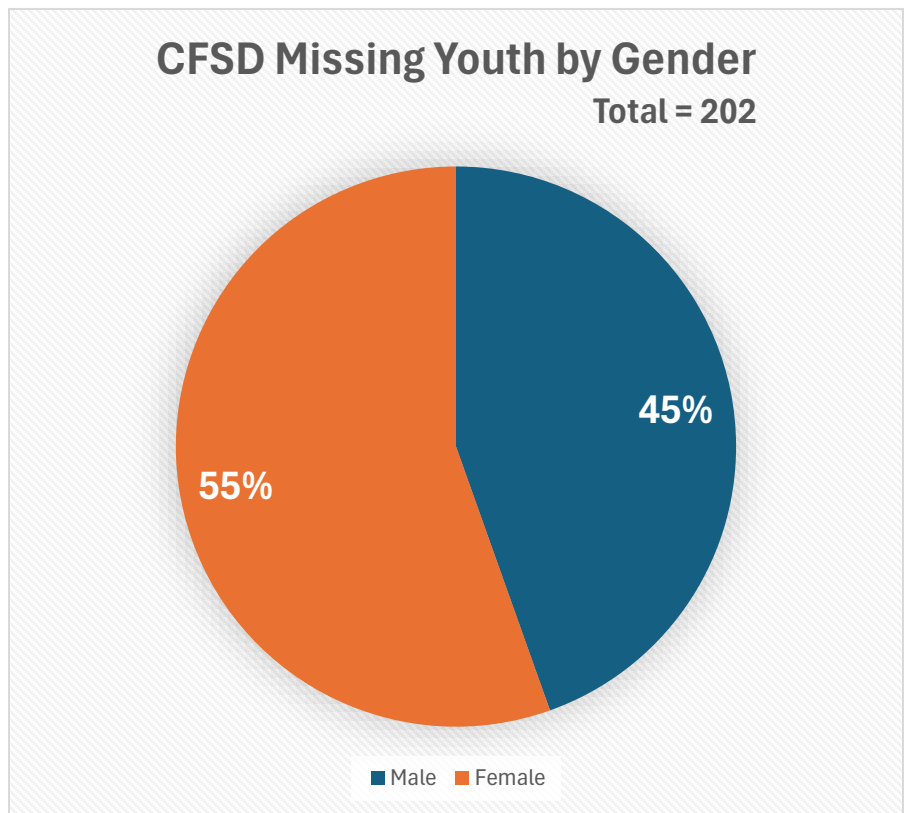
2024 CFSD Monthly Missing Youth Data

**One youth is still listed on the missing clearinghouse.

January 2022 - July
2024 CFSD Missing
Youth by Age



January 2022 - July
2024 CFSD Missing
Youth by Gender



**January 2022 -
July 2024 CFSD
Missing Youth
by Race**

