

PHOTO DISTRIBUTION FRAMEWORK

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Background

Every day, all around the world, children go missing. While the issues of child abduction and missing children are global in nature, they unfortunately lack a global response. Currently, there is no harmonized, international strategy aimed at adequately addressing missing children and child abduction. National strategies, when they do exist, vary from country to country. While international legal instruments, such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, provide a universal definition of a “child,”¹ there is no similar global consensus on the definition of “missing child,” or on how to investigate cases involving missing and abducted children. This, in turn, makes it difficult to know the full extent of the problem and to determine how best to protect children from going missing or being abducted.

To facilitate and promote a unified global response, in August 2015 the International Centre for Missing & Exploited Children (ICMEC) released its [Model Missing Child Framework](#), which outlines 12 key criteria countries should consider when developing a national strategy/response. ICMEC now is in the process of developing a series of companion pieces to provide further guidance on select criteria. This document represents the second in the series. The first – [Rapid Emergency Child Alert System Framework](#) – was published in August 2016, and was co-authored by ICMEC and AMBER Alert Europe.

The purpose of this *Photo Distribution Framework* is to explain the role a photo distribution strategy plays in engaging the many stakeholders, media and the public in the search for a missing child, and to clarify the differences between a photo distribution² strategy and a Rapid Emergency Child Alert System. Distributing a missing child’s photo along with key information about him or her can significantly increase the chances of the child’s safe recovery.

Purpose of a Photo Distribution Strategy

Agencies working on missing children cases should have some means of distributing a missing child’s photo and description, and if need be, the ability and willingness to assist with in local, regional, and national dissemination efforts. A well-established, effective photo distribution strategy can bring widespread coverage when needed, providing law enforcement with indispensable leads, and keeping the missing child’s information fresh in the minds of the community until the child is recovered, regardless of how long the child has been missing.

An effective photo distribution strategy requires the coordinated engagement of a variety of stakeholders: from law enforcement, government agencies, and social services, to non-governmental organizations (NGOs), industry partners (*e.g.*, technology and transportation), and, in some instances, media and the public.

This *Photo Distribution Framework* is divided into two key sections:

¹ See *e.g.*, United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. UN General Assembly, Convention on the Rights of the Child, 20 November 1989, United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 1577, p. 3, Part 1, Article 1. The Convention on the Rights of the Child defines “child” as “every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier.”

² For purposes of this document, photo distribution is the process of disseminating a missing child’s photo and information to the public via various technology tools to aid in the child’s recovery. Throughout this document, “distribute” and “disseminate” (and all their variations) are used interchangeably.

1. **Critical elements** of a distribution strategy, including consent for dissemination, risk assessment, safety and privacy concerns, geographical reach of dissemination, distribution mechanisms, and information to be disseminated; and
2. **Distribution strategies**, including internal dissemination, public dissemination, endangered missing child advisories, and rapid emergency child alerts.

Critical Elements of a Photo Distribution Strategy

As part of a comprehensive missing child response, the dissemination strategy should outline certain elements and standards so that they are well-established in advance of an actual missing child case as well as all stakeholders involved know their responsibilities. The list below provides some of the critical elements of a strategy, but is in no way exhaustive. A dissemination strategy should be developed to respond to local needs, context, and resources. A flow chart of the Photo Distribution process is available in Appendix I.

1. Consent

During the search for a missing child, agencies that seek to appeal to the public should first acquire consent from the appropriate authorities to disseminate a photo of and information about the missing child. For example, in some countries the courts or law enforcement may be the appropriate entities to grant such consent. If no consent guidelines exist, it is considered good practice to seek consent from the relevant law enforcement agency as well as the missing child's legal guardian(s), when possible/appropriate. This consent allows the investigative agency and other stakeholders to publicly distribute the child's photo and information while still ensuring the child's privacy is safeguarded.

2. Risk Assessment

There are two critical risk assessments the investigative agency should undertake when investigating a missing child case. The first risk assessment should be performed immediately upon receiving a report of a missing child to effectively determine the child's immediate level of risk. Key considerations include:

- The child's emotional, physical and psychological state;
- The circumstances of the child's disappearance, including possible reasons he or she went missing;
- Resources available to the child (e.g. access to phone, credit card, cash or transportation).

A further risk assessment is needed to determine whether a specific case – including a photo of an information about the missing child – should be made available to the public. Not all missing children cases are suitable for public appeal. For example, in cases where custody disputes are involved or there is a possibility of violence, the investigative agency may want to undertake a less public approach. If public dissemination is deemed unsuitable, agencies should consider other available tools, resources, and strategies (e.g., distributing case-specific information among law enforcement/child protection agencies only; retrieving data from a child's cellphone and/or other mobile device; tracking the geo-location of the cellphone/mobile device).

3. Child's Safety and Privacy Concerns

Over the course of the entire investigation, including when making the decision to engage the public (or not), the child's safety and best interests should be a primary concern. A crucial question that should always be top of mind is whether engaging the public by distributing photos of and information about the missing child will help – or hinder – the ongoing investigation.

When the missing child has been recovered, it is important that the agency(ies) responsible for disseminating information about the missing child undertake follow-up measures to remove, where possible, the child's photos and information, whether in hard copy or digital/electronic format. The continuing presence of such information in a public forum is misleading to the public and can be damaging to the child following recovery. In some instances, it may even serve to re-victimize the child (*e.g.*, entry into university, applying for employment). To help mitigate these challenges, some organizations have opted to share links to websites containing information about cases of missing children through social networks. By doing so, the organization has more control over the information as the link can be voided/disabled when the child is found, thus helping to protect the child's privacy.

4. Information Provided

Any information provided to the public should help in the recovery of the missing child. It should not confuse the public, or cause any misunderstanding of what is being asked of them. At a minimum, the information provided to the public should include:

- A recent photo of the missing child;
- The missing child's name and age;
- Any unique characteristics that may help identify the child (*e.g.*, tattoos, birthmarks, disabilities);
- What he or she was last seen wearing (*e.g.*, articles of clothing, shoes, jewelry, glasses);
- Where he or she was last seen;
- Information (*e.g.*, description, photo) of any person the child is suspected to be with; and
- Contact information for the agency the public should contact.

5. Geographical Dissemination

If the decision is made to distribute a missing child's photo and information, what should be the geographic reach of the distribution (*e.g.*, local, regional, national)? For example, targeting the area where the child went missing may increase the likelihood of finding the child. The end goal of geographic targeting is to recover the child as quickly and safely as possible while avoiding overexposure and desensitization of the public to the information. Available distribution methods also may impact the geographic range of distribution.

6. Distribution Mechanisms

A missing child's photo and information can be disseminated in different ways depending on available technology tools. Information can be distributed through traditional as well as more innovative means. Examples include:

- Using volunteers to hand out posters;
- Emailing and faxing distribution lists;
- Issuing press releases;
- Sharing information with radio and TV stations, and other media outlets;
- Displaying information on TV screens, in taxis, buses, hospitals, stores, train stations, etc.; and
- Posting information on websites and social media networks;
- Distributing information through a dedicated app.

This list is by no means exhaustive. Resources for distribution are continuously evolving.

No matter the mechanism used for dissemination, the information being distributed should be pre-designed and consistent, and it should reach a sizable audience. Distribution efforts should be

coordinated and all stakeholders involved should receive the same information and have a predetermined procedure outlining the necessary steps of the dissemination process.

7. Closure and Removal of Information

Once a child is recovered, it is important to notify every stakeholder who assisted in the search that the case is closed and no further action is needed. Additionally, it is crucial to remove photos of and information about the child from the public realm, whenever possible. The continuing presence of that information in a public forum can be detrimental to the child later in life (*e.g.*, entry into university, job applications, etc.).

Distribution Strategies

The strategies outlined in this section can be used separately or in conjunction with one another, depending on case specifics and available resources, and subject to applicable law. Each of these strategies should have a structured, pre-approved plan in place that outlines applicable criteria, agency/stakeholder responsibilities, etc.

Internal Dissemination

While public dissemination is being contemplated, information on a missing child cases (including available photographs) can and should be exchanged between the investigative agency-in-charge and other law enforcement agencies, as well as other entities, such as the national immigration agency and/or passport-issuing body, highway patrol, NGOs, child protection agencies, and social services. This information-sharing between agencies may help reduce the likelihood of the missing child being left in a vulnerable situation or leaving the city/state/country while increasing the chances of a speedy recovery. Systems such as the FBI National Crime Information Center³ in the United States, the Canadian Police Information Centre,⁴ and the Schengen Information System⁵ in Europe, allow for prompt sharing of information between and among law enforcement. In countries where national databases exist, it is imperative that case information be entered as quickly as possible.

Public Dissemination

As each investigation into a report of a missing child is different, the information sought from the public will vary. Once the decision has been made to engage the public via photo distribution, the investigative agency should partner with other entities (*e.g.*, NGOs, media outlets, private companies) that can help disseminate the information. Volunteers may be helpful in distributing posters on the streets and in stores, while private companies may be able to help distribute posters electronically.

Given the rapid innovation of distribution tools and technologies, the responsible agency should define which types of media to use (*i.e.*, print media, digital/online media, social media) and to what degree. As mentioned above, the extent and scope of dissemination efforts will depend on the level of risk to the child. No matter the distribution mechanisms used, it is important to be able to halt the dissemination process and remove all information from the public's view when the public's help is no longer needed.

³ Federal Bureau of Investigations, *National Crime Information Center*, at <https://www.fbi.gov/services/cjis/ncic> (last visited Aug. 16, 2016).

⁴ Government of Canada, *Canadian Police Information Centre*, at <http://www.cpic-cipc.ca/index-eng.htm> (last visited Oct. 24, 2016).

⁵ European Commission, Migration and Home Affairs, *Schengen Information System*, at http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/borders-and-visas/schengen-information-system/index_en.htm (last visited Oct. 24, 2016).

As part of a public photo distribution plan, the investigative agency should determine if an INTERPOL Yellow Notice⁶ can/should be issued. The Yellow Notice is “a valuable law enforcement tool that can increase the chances of a missing person being located, particularly if there is a possibility that the person might travel, or be taken, abroad.”⁷

Another possible public dissemination mechanism is ICMEC’s Global Missing Children’s Network (GMCN), which connects law enforcement and NGOs across five continents.⁸

The dissemination plan for each case should be reviewed periodically to see if there is a need to include new information or disseminate in a different location. If a case is not resolved in a short period of time, the investigative agency and its partners should discuss alternative dissemination strategies. In cases involving long-term missing children,⁹ it may prove beneficial to create a new appeal with an age-progressed photo of the child.

Endangered Missing Child Advisories

An endangered missing child advisory is used to raise awareness of the specific dangers faced by an individual missing child, such as the lack of needed medication. Endangered missing child advisories can be used to notify the public in a timely manner while the investigative agency determines whether the case meets the stricter rapid emergency child alert criteria.

The launch criteria for an endangered missing child advisory should be clear and precise so as not to confuse the agencies involved or the public. The criteria for issuing an endangered missing child advisory should be different from the criteria for issuing a rapid emergency child alert. At a minimum, the following questions should be considered before launching an endangered missing child advisory:

- a. Is the child missing under unexplained or suspicious circumstances?
- b. Is the child believed to be in danger due to age, health, mental or physical disability, or environment/weather conditions?
- c. Is the child in the company of a potentially dangerous person, or is there any other factor that may put the child in danger?
- d. Is there enough information available to enable the public to assist in the safe recovery of the missing child?

The method of disseminating the endangered missing child advisory will vary depending on each agency’s internal policy in place and the scope of dissemination. The general dissemination methods ideally will be reviewed to determine which methods to use for the advisory (*i.e.*, print media, digital/online media, social media). Most likely, not all are appropriate in all instances. (*e.g.*, information about a child missing in an urban area will most likely not need to be displayed on a highway sign, but more likely within the public transportation system).

⁶ INTERPOL, Connecting Police for a Safer World, *Yellow Notices*, at <https://www.interpol.int/en/INTERPOL-expertise/Notices/Yellow-Notices> (last visited Oct. 24, 2016).

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ International Centre for Missing & Exploited Children, *Global Missing Children’s Network*, at www.globalmissingkids.org (last visited Oct. 24, 2016).

⁹ There is no universal definition for “long-term missing child.” The Australian Federal Police defines it as: “when a missing person case lasts longer than three months...,” at <https://www.missingpersons.gov.au/find-out-more-about-missing-persons/what-missing-person> (last visited Dec. 12, 2016). In the United States, the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children defines “long-term missing” as: “...when all the substantive leads have been thoroughly followed and all the likely places to look for the child have been searched,” at http://www.missingkids.com/en_US/publications/NCMEC_LongTermMissingGuide_2016.pdf, p. 26 (last visited Dec. 12, 2016).

Rapid Emergency Child Alert Systems

Rapid Emergency Child Alert Systems provide a means to broadcast and disseminate information about the most serious missing children cases to the public. The most well-known Rapid Emergency Child Alert System is the U.S. AMBER Alert, a voluntary partnership between law enforcement, broadcasters, transportation agencies, and others.

The goal of any Rapid Emergency Child Alert System is to instantly galvanize an entire community to assist in the search for and safe recovery of a missing child by providing detailed information about the missing child, the suspected abductor, the suspected abductor's vehicle, etc. While each Rapid Emergency Child Alert System will have its own criteria for determining when an alert should be launched, depending on local needs and context, key criteria should include:

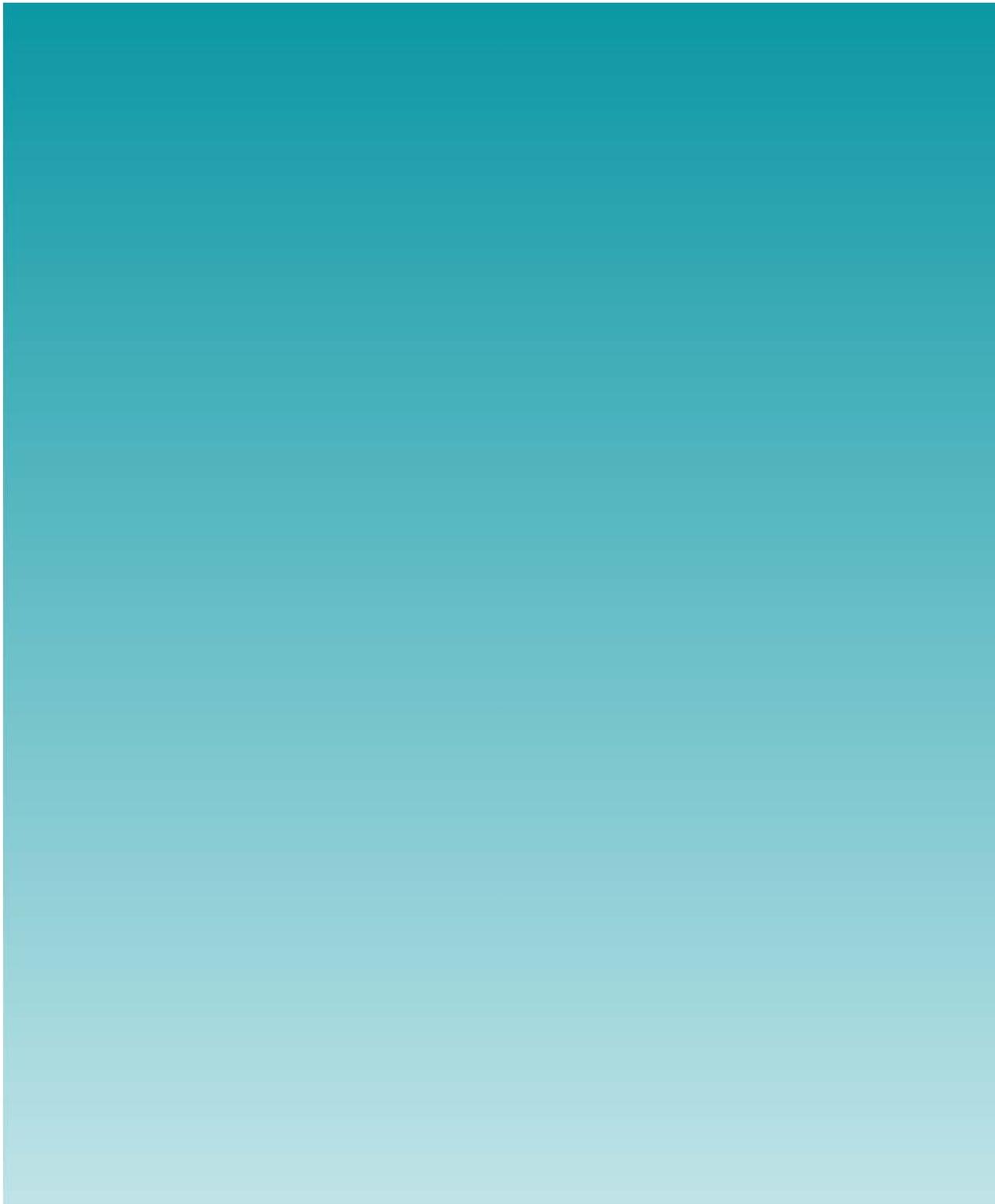
- a. The child is under 18 years old;
- b. There is information to indicate that the child is in imminent danger of serious harm or death;
and
- c. There is sufficient information available to enable the public to assist law enforcement with locating the child.

As with endangered missing child advisories, Rapid Emergency Child Alert Systems alone are not enough. It is paramount that a comprehensive response to a report of a missing child first be established by law enforcement and relevant partner agencies, and that the Rapid Emergency Child Alert System complements the overall missing child response. For a more detailed understanding of rapid emergency child alert systems, please review the [*Rapid Emergency Child Alert System Framework*](#).

Appendix A: Photo Distribution Flow Chart



****IMPORTANT NOTE:** The full process, from ASSESS to DISTRIBUTION is a continuous dialog between investigative agencies and the public. The process should be reviewed and updated periodically throughout the investigation.



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