

The September 2021 Arizona Department of Child Safety Comparing Department Practices for Classifying and Locating Children Missing from Care to Best Practices special report found that the Department’s practices for classifying and locating children missing from care are generally consistent with recommended practices, but caseworkers did not always comply with documentation requirements, the Department and law enforcement have not formalized expectations for collaboration, and the Department lacks some detailed guidance for caseworkers’ ongoing efforts to locate children missing from care. We made 4 recommendations to the Department, and its status in implementing the recommendations is as follows:

### Status of 4 recommendations

Implemented	2
<b>Not implemented</b>	<b>2</b>

The Department has implemented 2 of the recommendations directed to it but has not implemented the remaining 2 recommendations. Because the Department has not made further progress toward implementing these 2 recommendations since the initial followup and reported that it will take no further action to implement these recommendations, we do not see further benefit in continuing to follow up with the Department. Therefore, unless otherwise directed by the Joint Legislative Audit Committee, this report concludes our follow-up work on the Department’s efforts to implement the recommendations from the September 2021 report.

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### Update: Number of children missing from care has decreased since 2020

The number of children missing from the Department’s care has decreased since calendar year 2020. Specifically, as reported in our September 2021 special report, in calendar year 2020, the number of children the Department reported were on runaway or missing status as of the end of each month ranged from 216 to 245 runaway children and from 34 to 51 missing children.<sup>1</sup> During calendar year 2020, the total number of runaway and missing children combined comprised approximately 2 percent of the children in Department care. Conversely, as shown in Figure 1 (see page 2), the number of children the Department reported were on runaway or missing status as of the end of each month between April 2022 and March 2023 ranged from 126 to 163 runaway children and 29 to 38 missing children, respectively. During this 12-month time frame, the total number of runaway and missing children comprised approximately 1.5 percent of the children in Department care.

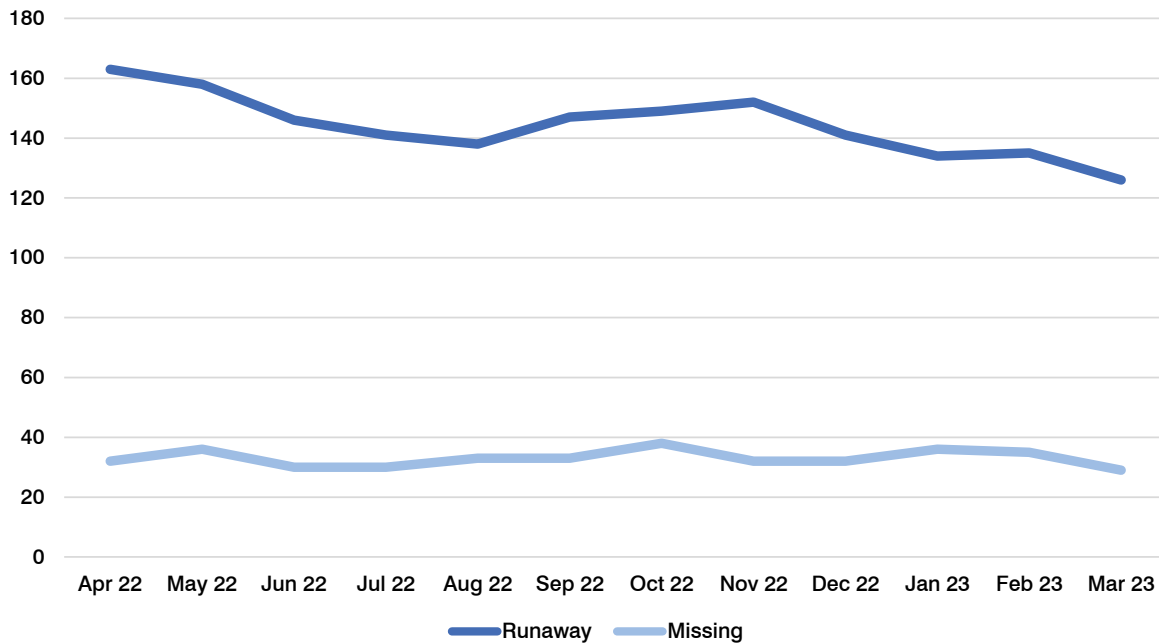
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<sup>1</sup> The Department uses 2 placement types to reflect the status of children missing from care in its Monthly Operational and Outcome Report: “runaway” for runaway children and “missing” for missing/abducted children.

## Figure 1

### Number of children Department reported on runaway or missing status at the end of each month April 2022 through March 2023<sup>1</sup>

(Unaudited)



<sup>1</sup> These numbers represent all children on runaway or missing status as of the end of each calendar month, including new runaway or missing children and children who remain missing from care from a previous month(s).

Source: Auditor General staff review of information from the Department's *Monthly Operational and Outcome Report* for April 2022 through March 2023.

## Finding 1: Department practices for classifying and locating children missing from care are generally consistent with CWLA-recommended practices, but caseworkers did not always comply with documentation requirements

1. The Department should revise its policies to provide guidance on when specific stakeholder notifications and documentation of those notifications by caseworkers are not applicable, such as when a stakeholder is already aware of a child's status or the notification is accomplished another way.

### Implemented at 6 months

2. To help ensure timely documentation, the Department should expand its biweekly review process to include determining whether efforts to locate children missing from care are occurring and documented in case notes.

**Not implemented**—As reported in our initial followup, the Department revised its biweekly review procedures to include determining whether efforts to locate children missing from care are occurring and documented in case notes. However, similar to what we found during our initial followup, our review of the Department's biweekly review reports from April 2022 through February 2023 found that Department staff are not consistently implementing the biweekly review procedures. For example, the Department's biweekly review process procedures require its staff to indicate in biweekly review reports an anticipated date for making efforts to locate missing children that have not yet occurred, but Department staff did not always include these dates in the reports when applicable. This inconsistent implementation of the procedures had potentially occurred because the biweekly review report's instructions do not require staff to include an anticipated date for making efforts to locate missing children, contrary to the Department's written procedures. Despite this gap between the written procedures and the

biweekly review report's instructions, the Department reported it does not plan to further revise the instructions or take other actions to ensure all its staff record anticipated dates for making efforts to locate missing children as required by its biweekly review procedures. As a result, the Department cannot ensure all its staff have made required efforts to help locate missing children.

## **Finding 2: Department and law enforcement have not formalized expectations for collaboration, and Department lacks some detailed guidance for caseworkers' ongoing efforts to locate children missing from care**

3. The Department should work with law enforcement to formalize expectations regarding their respective roles and responsibilities for locating children missing from Department care, and work with State policymakers to address potential barriers as needed. For example, the Department could pilot establishing a formal agreement or mutually agreed-upon protocols with 1 or more of the approximately 150 law enforcement agencies in Arizona, such as an agency where improved coordination would be beneficial; assess whether the pilot was helpful for improving coordination; and if so, work with State policymakers to determine a practical approach to formalizing expectations between the Department and law enforcement agencies State-wide. The Department and law enforcement could explore other options for formalizing expectations as well.

**Not implemented**—As reported in our initial followup, according to the Department, it verbally engaged with 2 law enforcement agencies and found that these agencies support the Department's work to locate children missing from its care. As a result, the Department concluded that developing a formal agreement with these agencies related to roles and responsibilities for locating children missing from Department care was not necessary. However, the Department declined to provide further details about the nature, length, and number of verbal engagements it had with the 2 law enforcement agencies, citing concerns about damaging the positive working relationship it had with those agencies. The Department also reiterated its concern expressed during our audit that it would be impractical to establish a formal agreement with each of the approximately 150 law enforcement agencies in the State. However, as indicated in our September 2021 special report, although the Department and law enforcement agencies do have joint investigative procedures, these are not specific to locating children missing from care, and recommended practices include developing and implementing formal agreements or mutually agreed-upon protocols to address various elements of coordination between law enforcement and child welfare agencies. Further, as stated in our recommendation, the Department could explore multiple options for formalizing expectations with law enforcement agencies, such as first piloting a formal agreement or other mutually agreed upon protocols with 1 or more law enforcement agencies in Arizona. The Department has not pursued other options for formalizing expectations with law enforcement agencies, including working with State policymakers as needed. Although the Department agreed with our September 2021 finding and agreed to implement this recommendation in a different manner by working with State policymakers as required to formalize expectations, and indicated it may explore coordination with the Arizona Department of Public Safety regarding the functions or role they have with missing children, it reported that it will take no further action to implement this recommendation.

4. Update its policies and/or develop supplemental guidance documents to provide additional guidance on its expectations for the types and frequency of caseworkers' ongoing efforts to locate children missing from care and their collaboration with law enforcement, and ensure caseworkers who manage cases involving children missing from care are informed of and trained on this additional guidance.

**Implemented at 6 months**