# Rapid Emergency Child Alert System Framework

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## About Us

**AMBER Alert Europe** is an international not for profit organisation with 22 members (law enforcement, ministries & NGOs) in 17 countries. Its Police Network consists of over 35 experts representing law enforcement from 12 EU countries. Dedicated to the protection of missing children, AMBER Alert Europe connects citizens with law enforcement when the police believe the public can help find the child. It provides for training and cross-border coordination to law enforcement. AMBER Alert Europe provides support in an advisory and knowledge-sharing role to its members and partners, who, together with the network of connected citizens, are on the lookout when a child goes missing across Europe. For more information on AMBER Alert Europe, please visit www.amberalert.eu.

The **International Centre for Missing & Exploited Children** (ICMEC) works around the world to advance child protection and safeguard children from abduction, sexual abuse, and exploitation. Headquartered in Alexandria, Virginia, U.S.A., ICMEC also has regional representation in Brazil and Singapore. Together with an extensive network of public and private sector partners, ICMEC's team responds to global issues with tailored local solutions. For more information on ICMEC, please visit www.icmec.org.

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## Background

Research out of the United Kingdom and United States suggests that the first three hours after a child goes missing are the most critical.[1] The rate of safe recovery can decrease rapidly, depending on the known circumstances contributing to the child's disappearance and the perceived risks or danger to the child. Thus, it is important for law enforcement to have a planned response to act swiftly and effectively.

One of the many tools to help recover missing and abducted children is a rapid emergency child alert system. The first such alert system – the AMBER Alert – was established in the United States in 1996 and was named in honour of 9-year-old Amber Hagerman who was abducted while riding her bicycle in Arlington, Texas, and was later found murdered.[2] Since then, other countries have adopted similar systems, many of which are called AMBER Alert, but other names have been used as well. An alert system is a voluntary partnership between law enforcement, broadcasters, social and other media, transportation agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and others working together to activate or disseminate urgent bulletins in the most serious missing children cases. The goal is to galvanize an entire community to assist in the search for and safe recovery of a missing child by providing detailed information to the public on the missing child and, where relevant, any adult the child is with. To date, 24 countries around the world have adopted similar alert systems to help recover missing and abducted children as quickly as possible.[3]

The following guidelines should be taken into consideration when developing an alert system. The list is in no way exhaustive, and should be developed to respond to local needs and context. The missing children issue is complex and multi-faceted including prevention, support and after care. This document and a rapid emergency child alert system should be used in conjunction with other protocols and procedures designed to support the rapid and safe recovery of a missing child.

## Setting up a rapid emergency child alert system

For a rapid emergency child alert system to work effectively, there must be a process in place to enable its proper operation. Alerts must be considered "special" and used only for the highest risk cases so as not to desensitise the public. It also is important that the process is sufficiently well understood, robust and capable of handling both large and small investigations.

When establishing such an alert system, countries can benefit from a multi-disciplinary approach, including law enforcement and distribution partners as well as other appropriate entities such as non-governmental organisations. Each of these entities has resources to assist with successful dissemination of the alert. It is crucial that each understands their responsibilities and how to best collaborate with all other parties involved. For example, law enforcement makes the decision of when to launch an alert and what information can be released to the public; NGOs support the distribution mechanism (i.e. re-broadcasting to their partners, posting on their websites); and distribution partners

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[1] Washington State Attorney General's Office, *Case Management for Missing Children Homicide Investigation* (2006) 7 and 13, *at* http://www.atg.wa.gov/child-abduction-murder-research (last visited Apr. 3, 2016) (on file with the International Centre for Missing & Exploited Children).

[2] National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, AMBER Alert Program, *at* http://www.missingkids.com/amber (last visited June 9, 2016).

[3] In addition to the United States, Australia, Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, Cyprus, Czech Republic, France, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Jamaica, Luxembourg, Mexico, Malaysia, The Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, South Korea, Spain, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom have emergency child abduction alert systems in place.

focus on disseminating the alert as quickly and widely as needed. The multi-disciplinary team should meet periodically to review the system and respective roles.

## 1. Criteria to Launch an Alert

Each alert system will have its own criteria for when to launch according to local needs and context. However, 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 police in locating the child.

Criteria should be simple and clear, in an effort to avoid any possible misunderstandings. It is important to remember that even if a case does not fit the alert criteria, there are other resources available to help in the recovery of the child.[4] It is important for all agencies involved to be familiar with all available resources, determine which are appropriate in a given case, be able to explain why an alert may or may not have been issued and what alternate course of action may have been followed instead.

## 2. Decision Making Process

To make sure the alert system is not over- or under-used, there should be a protocol in place specifying who within the law enforcement agency has the authority to launch an alert, preferably a law enforcement missing person specialist. This person needs to be informed at an early stage of a missing child report and know what the circumstances are of the disappearance. Ideally, the person should have experience in overseeing an incident room, know how to prioritize leads, and be able to make quick decisions concerning the investigation. When making the decision to launch an alert, this person should evaluate answers to the following questions:

a. What is the risk to the child?
b. Is there enough information for the public to recognize the child and/or the adult(s) the child is with?
c. Is the media already covering the missing child story? If so, what will the effect of an alert be?

When a decision is made to launch an alert, it is vital to inform all in-country law enforcement authorities and everyone within the multi-disciplinary team of the alert. They should be advised who to contact if approached by the public or media to avoid confusion and to ensure information provided reaches law enforcement and dissemination partners as quickly as possible. Protocols for these notifications should be developed in consultation with the multi-disciplinary team and periodically tested to ensure effectiveness.

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[4] Other possible resources include, for example: notifying all in-country law enforcement agencies of the missing child; creating a missing child poster for general distribution; etc.

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### 3. Risk Assessment

The risk to the missing child is a critical part of assessing whether or not an alert should be issued. There must be an effective assessment or triage process in place, and it must be carried out quickly. The assessment can be performed by a pre-selected committee or by an experienced missing person specialist.

It also is advised that the assessment be continuously reviewed throughout the investigation as the risk to the child may change depending on the updated information received.

### 4. Number for Receiving Calls

A unique telephone number for the alert should be provided to the public to use for passing on relevant information about the missing child. The number should be predetermined and not changed after the launch of an alert, as it will help the public to associate the number with the alert.

The number may differ from the national emergency police number so that the call takers can easily differentiate the information received and provide priority to the alert. National protocols should be established to ensure that any received information whether through the national emergency police number or the unique alert number, is provided in a timely manner to the investigation team.

### 5. Call Handling Capacity

Issuing an alert is likely to result in a high volume of calls from the public. The volume will vary from country to country and may depend upon public perception of the risk to the missing child and the seriousness of the case. The call handling system must be sufficiently robust and manned by enough personnel to be able to intake and prioritize all calls. As noted above, it may be that a separate call system is implemented alongside the national emergency number. If possible, the call handling system should have rollover capability so that no call goes unanswered.

If social media is used to distribute alerts, it is important to consider a mechanism that can help monitor social media sites and prioritize any leads received.

### 6. Call Assessment

No matter the volume of calls or leads received, they will have to be assessed as to their relevance to the recovery of the child and how law enforcement will respond. Some of the calls will have to be investigated immediately and others will require more information to determine the relevance to the investigation. All actions taken for each call should be entered into one system to keep track of and know which investigative tasks are outstanding.

### 7. Engagement with and Coordination of Media and Other Distribution Outlets

Early engagement with the media when setting up an alert system is required to ensure that they understand what an alert system is, how it works, why it is being created, and how they can contribute to the recovery of a missing child. The media can assist in educating the public on the alert system.

In addition to traditional media outlets, the alert should be distributed through social media, Internet, apps, digital advertising boards, highways signs, transport providers, and others. If one of the distribution mechanisms fails, there will be other systems in place to disseminate information. This, in turn, provides greater reach and reliability. It is important to regularly review existing distribution mechanisms to make sure they function properly and current protocols are in place. Additionally, it is essential to review new technology that could help in distributing alerts.

At the time an alert is issued, there is a need to coordinate with the media to help disseminate the alert message to the public and ask them to look out for the child. Additional communication is needed

once an alert is deactivated to inform the public they no longer need to look for the child and let them know the outcome of the alert.

## 8. Dissemination Methods

The ability to disseminate alerts in the most efficient manner possible is desirable to avoid duplicative data entry and confusion. Sophisticated systems allow for:

- Single data entry;
- Standardized messaging;
- Selection of which outlets are to be used; and
- Geographic targeting of the dissemination.

## 9. Alert Message

It is important for the alert message to be short and precise. The public should be able to read the message within a few seconds. Ideally, the message should include the following information, if available:

a. The missing child's name;
b. Age of the child;
c. Where the child was last seen;
d. What the child was wearing;
e. Whether the child is in company of an adult and a description of the adult; and
f. Vehicle description.

The goal of the message is for the public to be able to identify the child and/or the person the child is with by the information provided in the message. Thus, it is important for the message to include unique identifiers to help the public. A photo of the child, the person they are with, and/or the vehicle will assist tremendously.

The alert message should include the specialised phone number for the alert. Depending on the country's needs, there may need to be a disclaimer asking the public not to approach the child or the adult the child is with but instead to call the appropriate authority.

The alert message requires periodic review and if necessary updating when new pertinent information has been gathered to help recover the missing child. The frequency of updating the alert may depend on individual case needs. It is also advised to create a deactivation message to alert the public to stop searching for the child and to inform them of any outcome.

## 10. Right to Erasure

The best interest of the child should be considered throughout the investigation, including when deciding whether to launch an alert. Measures should be put in place to help remove, where possible, any electronic footprint of the alert and the information disseminated along with it. 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 application, etc.).

## 11. After Care

It is important to consider how the missing child is looked after once they have been found and what steps might be needed to support them and their family. The nature of the incident that led them to being the subject of an alert, and the high level of publicity that they have received, can have a profound impact on their lives. The involvement of NGOs and social services may be of benefit.

### 12. Cross Border Issues

Most countries border another. It is important to set up communication, written protocols and collaboration with neighbouring law enforcement authorities in case the missing child travels to another country. If the neighbouring country does not have an alert system in place, or the case does not fall within their alert criteria, it is advised to have other resources available to help in the recovery of the missing child.

### 13. Review Process

It is necessary to conduct a debriefing or a review of the alert and the investigation to understand what worked, what did not and gather the lessons learned for future events. The process should be comprised of all stakeholders involved in the alert (media, transportation ministries, nongovernmental organisations, technology companies, etc.) and be impartial – the goal is to make the alert system stronger and more effective.

### 14. Training

Training is an integral part of the success of the alert system. It should be conducted at the outset to assist all stakeholders involved (law enforcement, NGOs, social services, etc.) with understanding the alert system and their responsibilities. On-going training can help build awareness of new dissemination mechanisms as well as new protocols which have been put in place in additional to training new personnel. Training also should be made available to the different stakeholders to help strengthen the collaboration among them as well as minimize any confusion over responsibilities.

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