Online Enticement: An Analysis of Missing Children and Youth 2020–2023



NATIONAL CENTER FOR MISSING & EXPLOITED CHILDREN®

Table of Contents

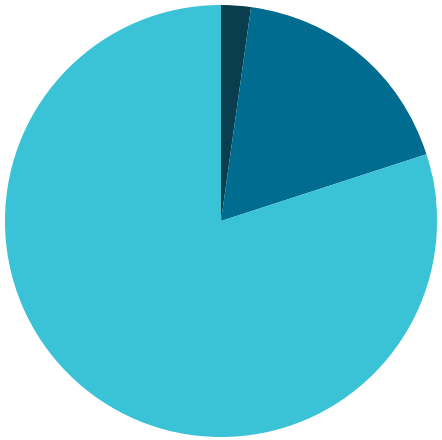
Executive Summary	1	Recovery Location and Distance Traveled	17
Demographics and Life Circumstances	4	Missing Duration	19
Endangerments	7	Offender Demographics	21
Before the Missing Incident	9	Conclusion	22
The Missing Incident	12	Resources	22
Recovery Circumstances	16	Disclaimers and Definitions	23

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Executive Summary

The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) recently conducted an analysis specifically of the 476 children reported missing to NCMEC between 2020 and 2023 who were enticed online. These children were reported by child welfare agencies, law enforcement, and families. By studying these cases and learning more about these children's experiences, we aim to better inform the response of parents, caregivers, law enforcement, child welfare professionals, and others who work to prevent this crime and bring missing children home safely.

Online Enticement and Case Type



2% **Missing Young Adult**

18% **Nonfamily Abduction**

81% **Endangered Runaway**

* See "Disclaimers and Definitions" on page 23

Online enticement involves an individual communicating with someone **believed to be a child via the internet to commit a sexual offense or abduction.**

This is a broad category, covering online grooming; sextortion; sending, receiving, or sharing sexually explicit images or videos; and **ultimately trying to meet face-to-face to sexually exploit the child.**

For the purposes of this report, a case was defined as **having a component of online enticement if it involved one or more of the following criteria:**

- ☑ The child was being groomed online
- ☑ The child had exchanged explicit images with an adult online
- ☑ The child had a prior history meeting an adult offline
- ☑ The child's internet history indicated plans to meet an adult offline
- ☑ The child was recovered with an offender they had met online

Below are some of the major findings of the analysis of 476 missing children enticed online from 2020 and 2023 reported to NCMEC:

98% Nearly all **(98%)** of the children missing due to online enticement were recovered.

Victims of online enticement were younger when compared to their overall missing peers.

59% of children involved in online enticement cases were 15 years old or younger, while

45% of all missing children from the same time period were 15 years old or younger.

Online enticement cases also had a higher proportion of children who were 13 years old or younger **(18% versus 11%)**.

Children targeted for enticement online were **likely to have an endangerment prior** to going missing that made them increasingly vulnerable. The five most frequent included:

- **Mental health**
- **History of drug or alcohol use**
- **Suicidal ideation or attempts**
- **Self-harm behaviors**
- **Victimization through child sex trafficking**

Most children were known to be speaking to adults online before their missing incident. Very few **(15%)** were known to take active steps to conceal this behavior. Prior to the missing incident, a fifth **(20%)** had already met an offender in person after first encountering them online.

How did the offender first make contact?

- Social media sites
- Gaming sites
- Handyman/ other sites

Most children were enticed online via conversations with an adult on social media sites, messenger apps, and gaming sites. **The five most common sites include:**

Snapchat **Instagram** **Facebook** **Discord** **TikTok**

When analyzed over time, **the trend of the sites where these conversations occurred changed.** Each year the proportion of online enticement via conversations...

on **Snapchat, Discord,** and **TikTok** have mostly **increased,**

while those on **Instagram** and **Facebook** have mostly **decreased.**

While the **offender traveled to the child in the majority of missing child cases** involving online enticement, there are differences in this behavior when analyzed by the age of the child.

If the child was **15 or younger the offender traveled to the child** the majority of the time, especially if that child was 13 years old or younger.

However, **older teens (16 and 17 years old) were almost as equally likely to travel** to the offender as they were to have the offender to travel to them.

Missing children enticed online often traveled a great distance before being returned home or being located. More than a third **(36%)** were recovered in a different state than their missing state. This was a much greater proportion than all children reported missing during this same time period **(8%).**

For the times when the child traveled to the offender, **it was most common for the offender to pay for that travel by:**

- Sending travel tickets
- Using a rideshare app
- Sending the child money via an app

Although offenders were typically younger adults with the highest proportion **between the ages of 20 and 29,** they also tended to be much older than the child. **41%** were more than 10 years older than the child.

10 **years** was the **median** age difference

13 **years** was the **mean** age difference

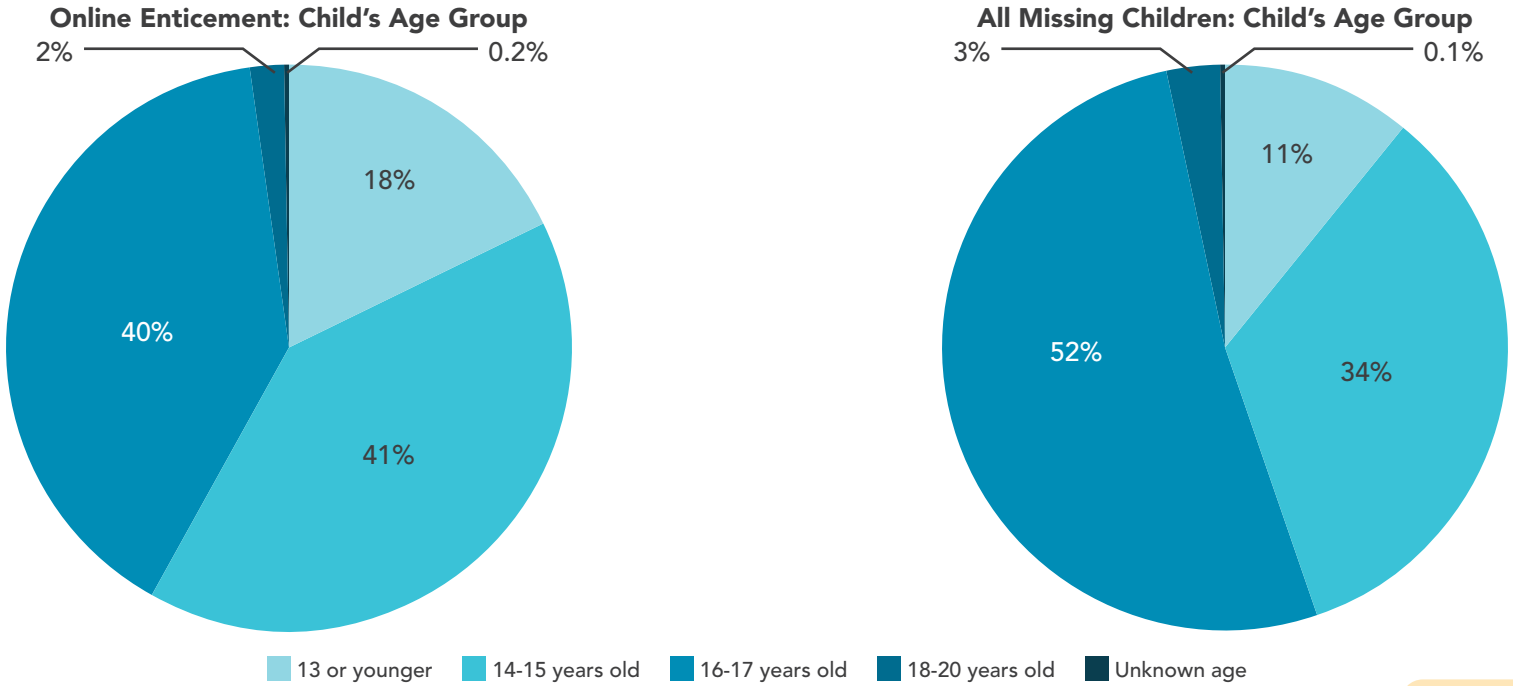
Offenders identified in these cases were **overwhelmingly male.**

Although the victims in this report are overwhelmingly female, males are still targeted for online enticement, too. By analyzing these missing child cases and learning more about these children's experiences, we aim to better inform the response of parents, caregivers, law enforcement, child welfare professionals, and others who work to prevent this crime and bring missing children back safely when it does occur.

Finally, it is important to note that the information in this report does not reflect all missing or abducted children cases; this report uses information gathered solely by NCMEC, which was reported directly by child welfare agencies, law enforcement, and families.

Also, while there may be some overlap, it also does not reflect all of the cases reported to the CyberTipline, NCMEC's platform for reporting child sexual exploitation online. For more information about those reports visit NCMEC.org/CyberTiplinedata.

Demographics and Life Circumstances



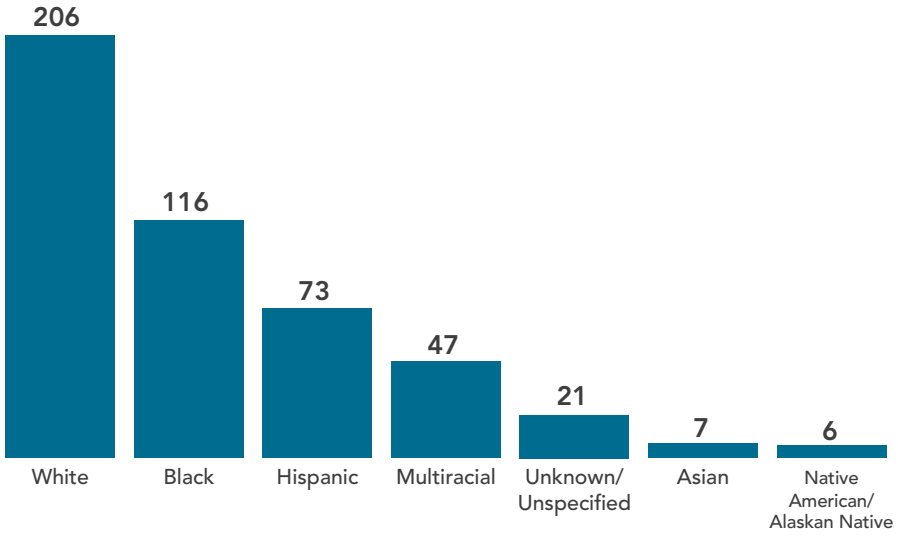
Charts for comparisons to all missing children do not include Family Abductions and Lost, Injured, or Otherwise Missing children because these case types were not present for any online enticement case.

Victims of online enticement were younger when compared to their overall missing peers. 59% of children involved in online enticement cases were 15 years old or younger, while 45% of all missing children from the same time period were 15 years old or younger. Online enticement cases also had a higher proportion of children who were 13 years old or younger (18% versus 11%). They also had a mean and median age of 15 years old.

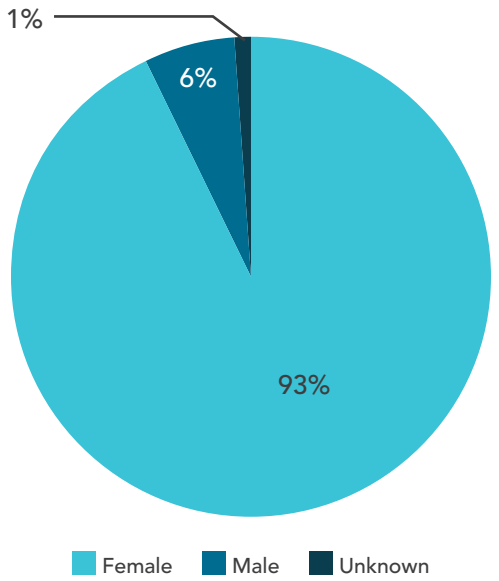
CASE EXAMPLE

A 13-year-old White male child met a male offender through the chat function on the game Team Fortress 2. Prior to his missing incident, he had been sharing explicit images with the offender. The child traveled to a different state to meet the offender. He was recovered after a witness spotted the child and the offender in a parking lot and reported the incident as suspicious.

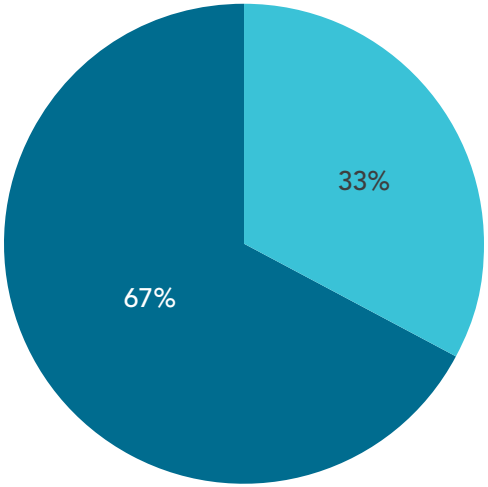
Child's Race/Ethnicity



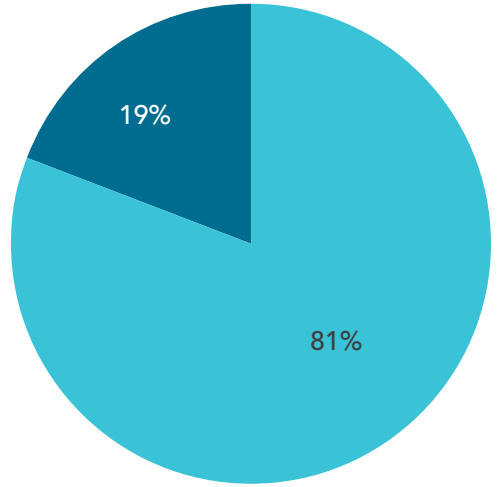
Child's Gender



Online Enticement: Missing from Care

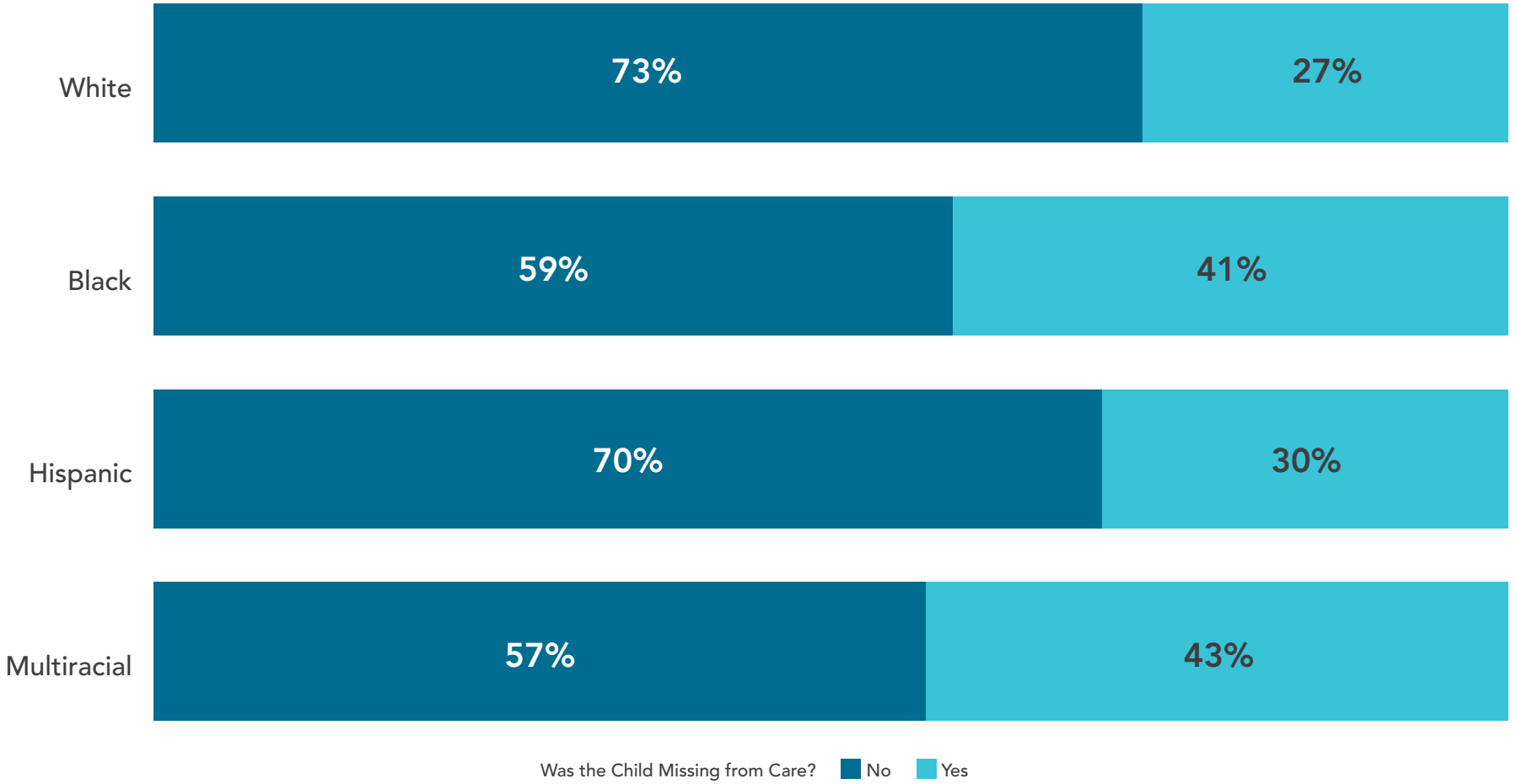


All Missing Children: Missing from Care





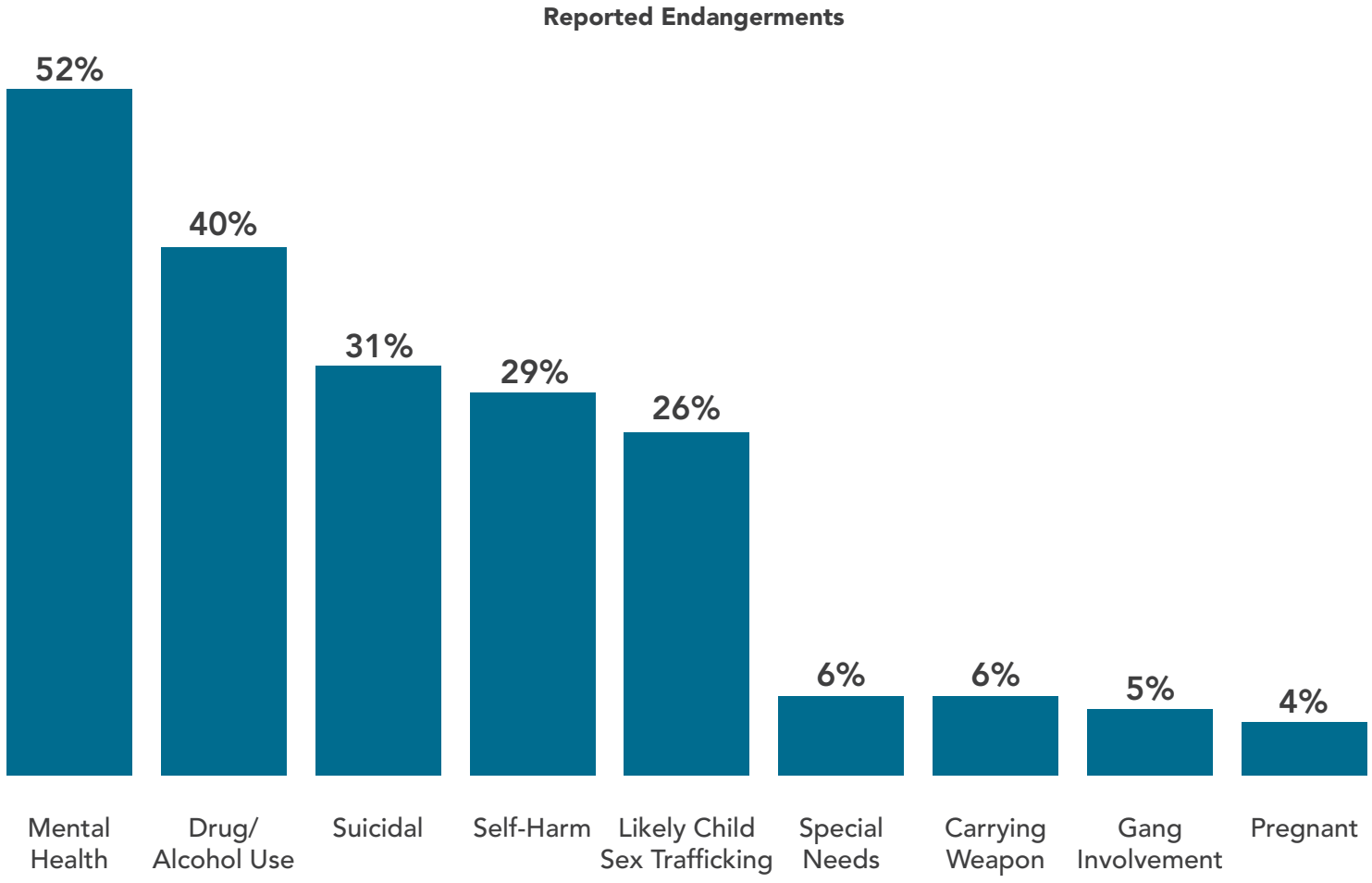
Online Enticement: Missing from Care and Race/Ethnicity



One Asian child went missing from care (out of seven total). Four Native American children were missing from care (out of six total).

Children enticed online were far less likely to be missing from the care of child protective services or foster care (33%) when compared to all missing children from the same time period (81%). Proportions also varied based on race. A greater proportion of Black and Hispanic children enticed online were reported missing from care when compared to their White counterparts who were enticed online.

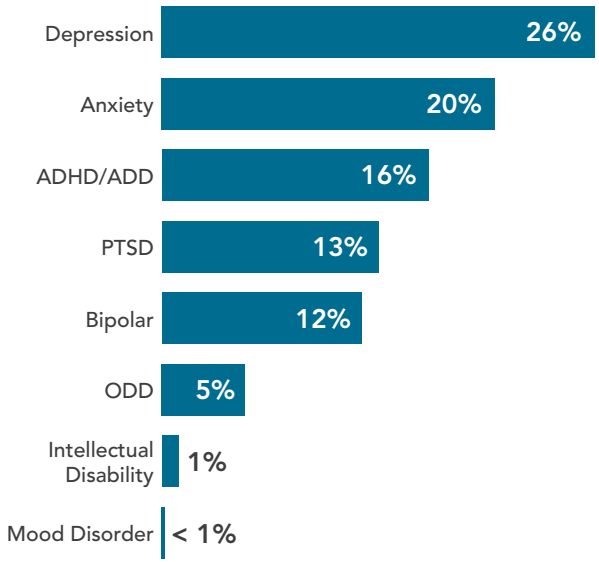
Endangerments



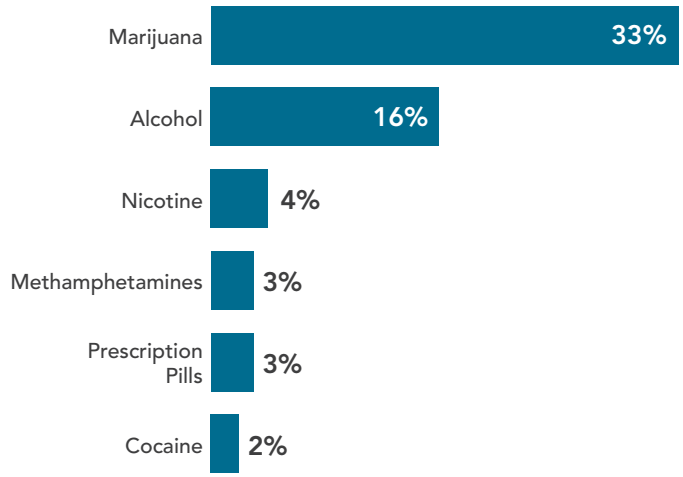
These percentages might overlap as children often have more than one endangerment present. At the same time, there were also children in these cases who did not have any endangerments.

The children in these cases had a mean number of three endangerments or conditions that may make them more vulnerable.

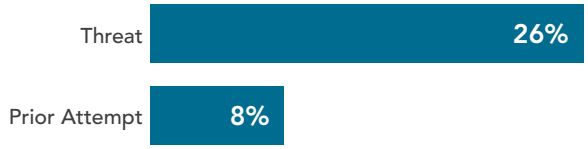
Mental Health Details



Drug Use Details



Suicidal Tendencies Details

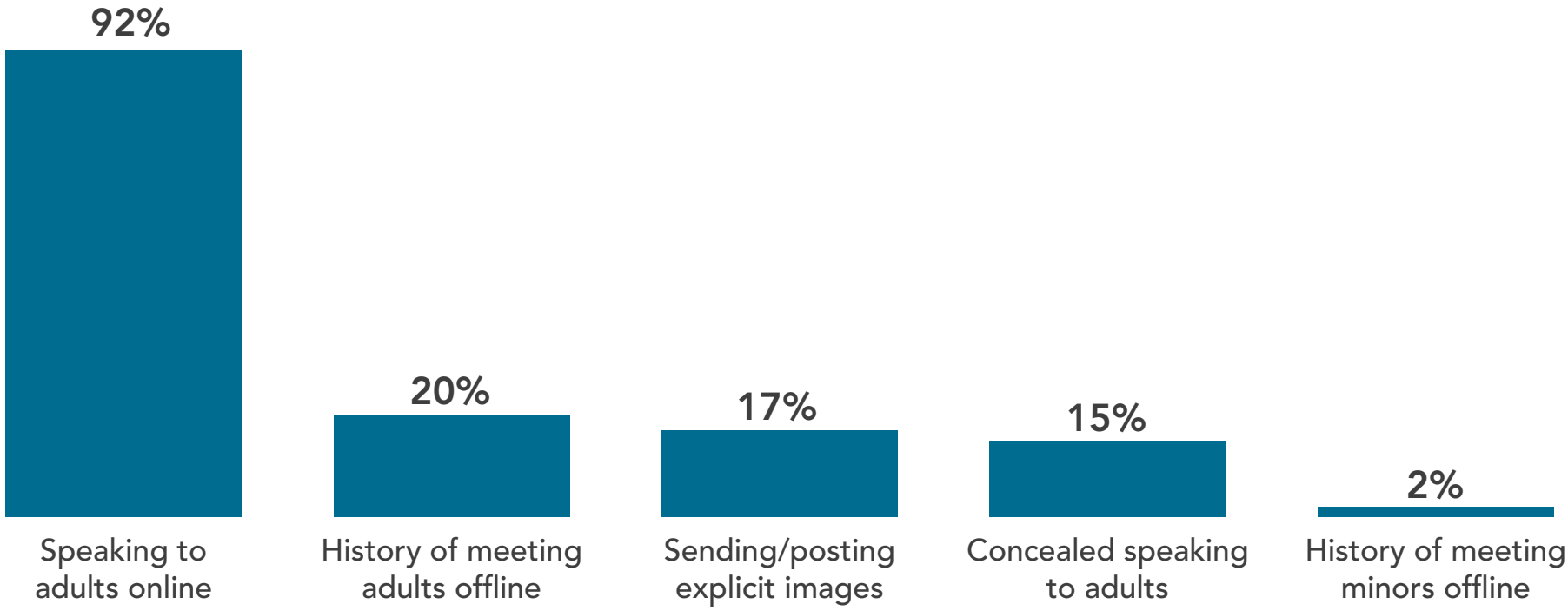


CASE EXAMPLE

A 15-year-old Black female child went missing after having a history of sexually explicit conversations with adults on Facebook. She was enticed to meet offline by one of these adults and resided with him for the duration of her missing incident. The child was able to maintain contact with a relative who convinced her to return home. After her recovery it was discovered the offender advertised the child for sex online during the missing incident. In addition, the child tested positive for multiple types of drugs. This demonstrates two of the many endangerments missing children enticed online face.

Before the Missing Incident

Internet Activities: Behavior Prior to Missing Incident

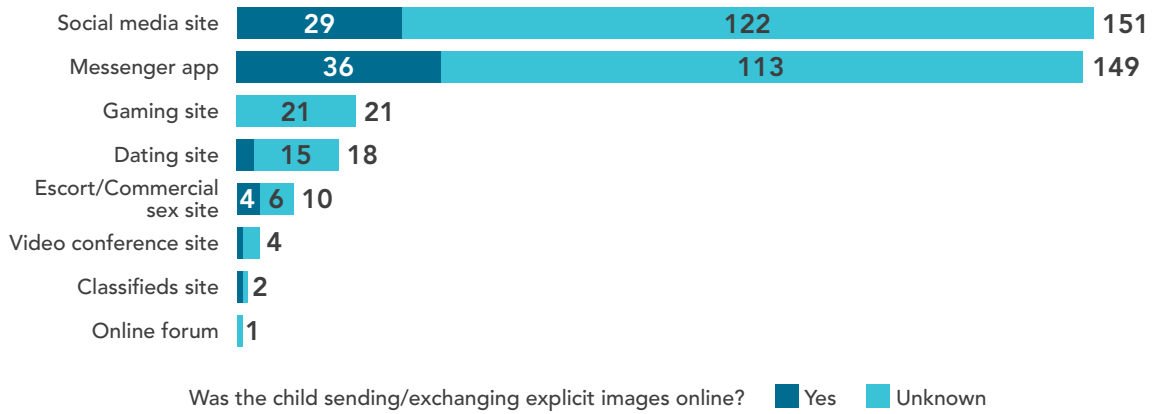


Most children were known to be speaking to adults online before their missing incident. Very few (15%) were known to take active steps to conceal this behavior. Prior to the missing incident, a fifth (20%) had already met an offender in person after first encountering them online.

Social media and messenger apps were the most commonly used mediums for online enticement and the exchange of explicit images. However, this behavior could occur on a number of different types of sites provided they offered a chatting or messaging function.

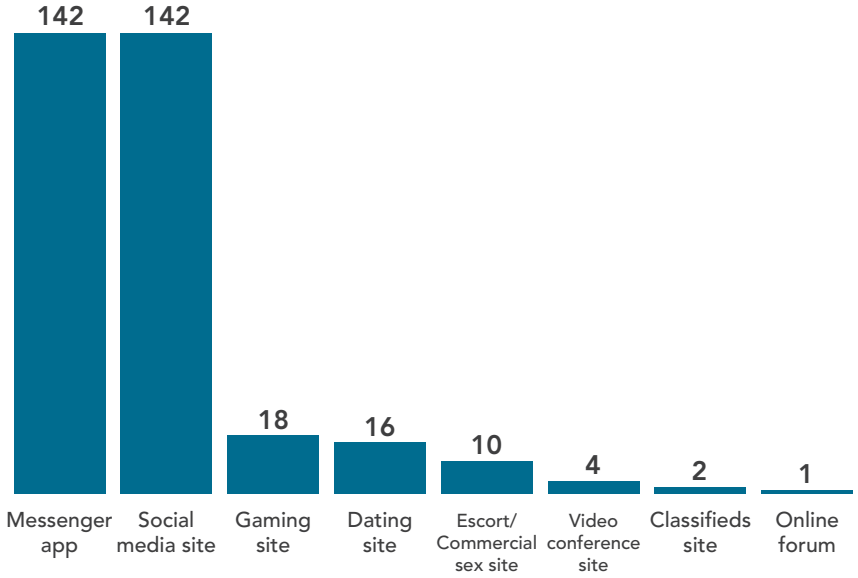
Male children were rare within this data set. However, a greater proportion of them appear to use gaming sites to speak to adults when compared to their female counterparts (16% versus 5%).

Speaking to Adults Online: Site Used

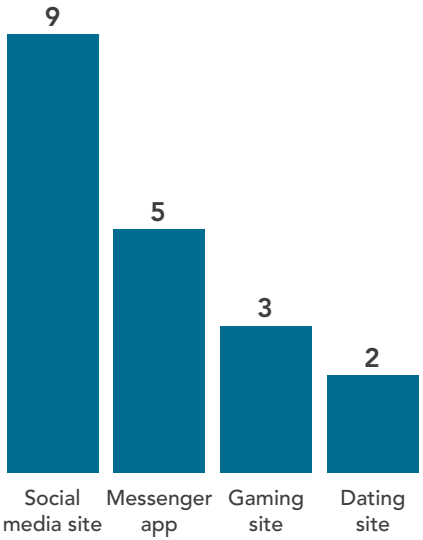


Escort and commercial sex work sites were sites solely intended for purchasing sex. Classified sites sometimes contain sections devoted to commercial sex, but they also advertised unrelated services as well (i.e. used furniture, seeking a roommate, etc).

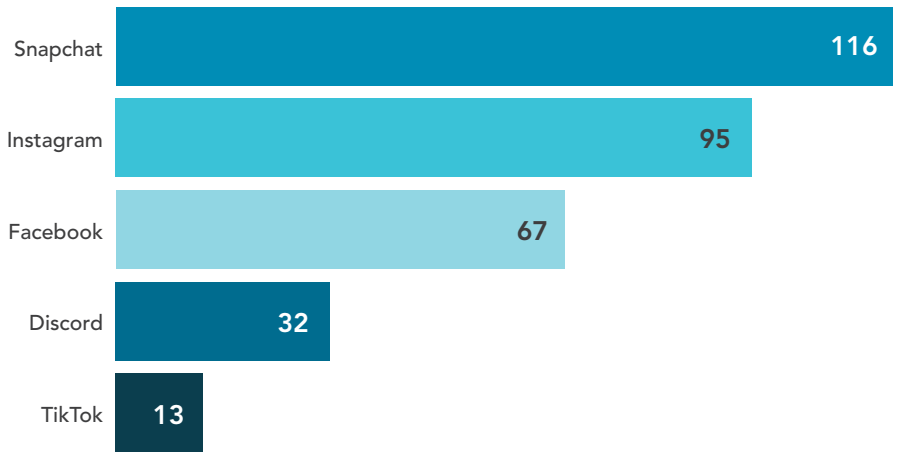
Female Children Speaking to Adults Online: Sites Used



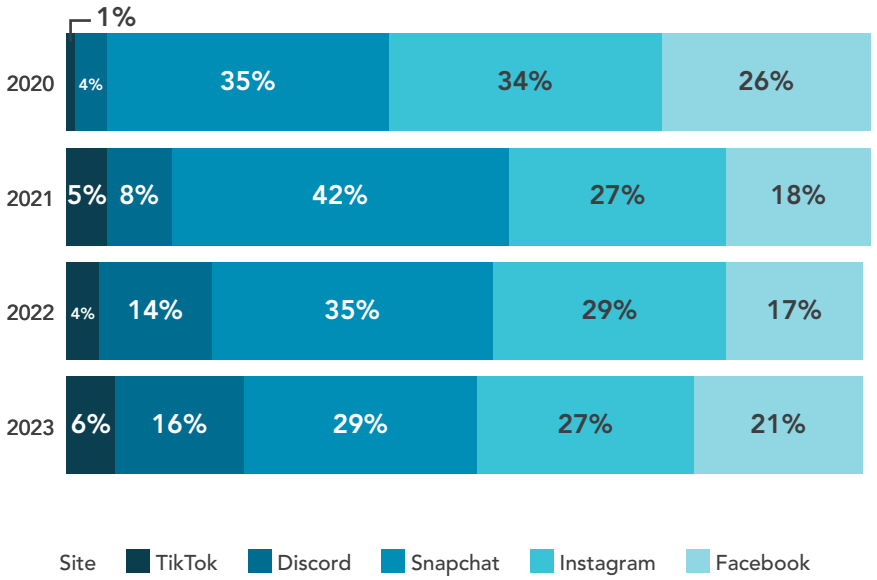
Male Children Speaking to Adults Online: Sites Used



Top Five Sites



Top Five Sites: Proportion by Year



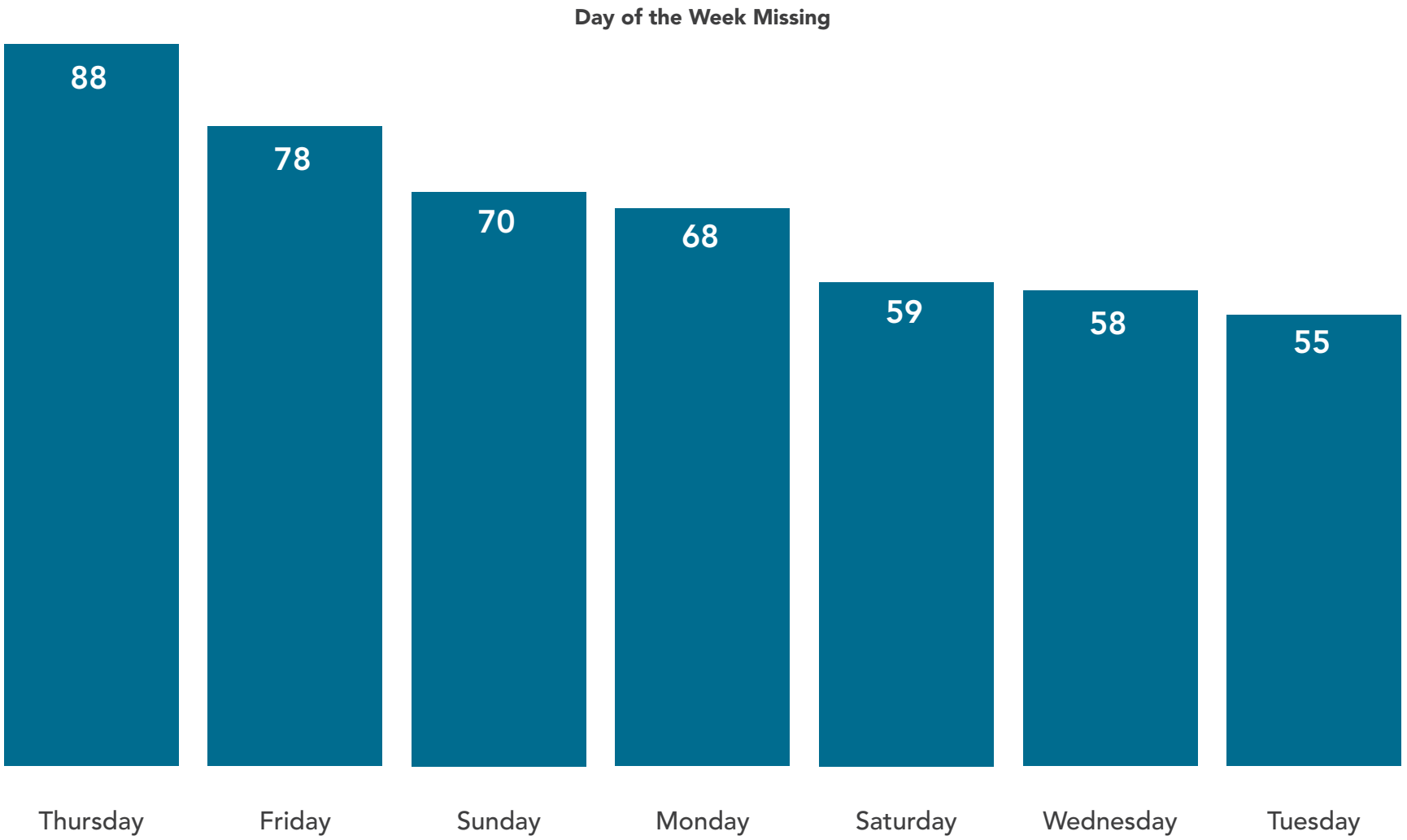
These five sites made up 76% of all sites in this data set. Some children were enticed on more than one website.

Online trends can change rapidly from year to year, and this is reflected in the data. Snapchat and Instagram's proportions have decreased, while Discord's proportion has been increasing.

CASE EXAMPLE

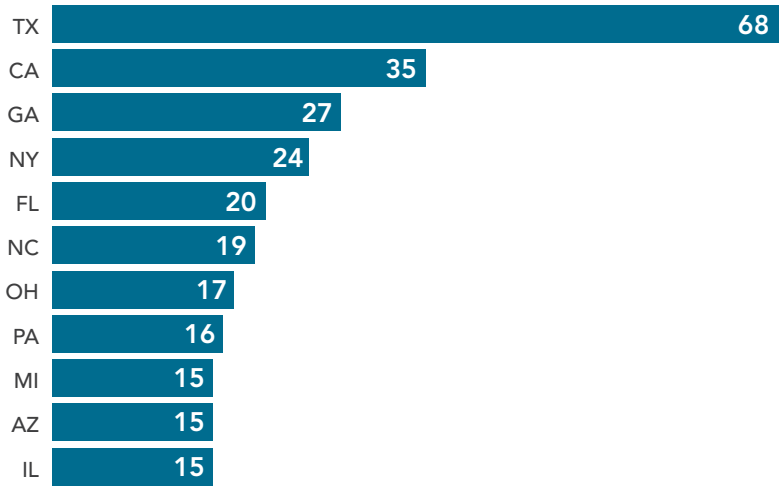
A 16-year-old Black male child with the mental function of a 10-year-old met a male offender through Final Fantasy XIV's chat function. The offender traveled to the child and drove him to a different city.

The Missing Incident

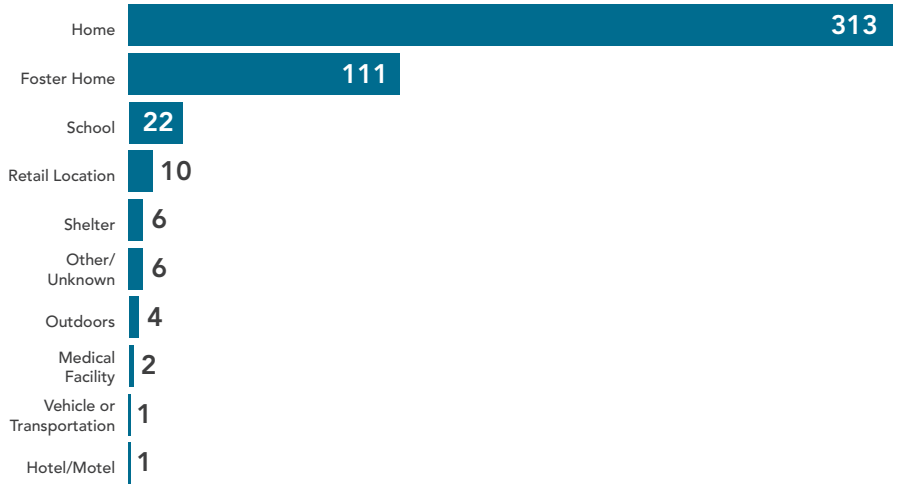


Missing incidents associated with online enticement were somewhat more common in the warmer seasons of spring and summer (53%) and during the lead-up to a weekend or on the weekend itself.

Top Ten Missing States

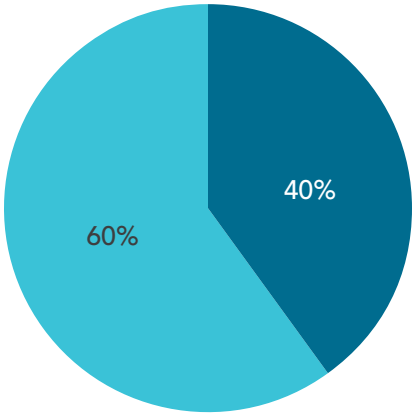


Missing Location



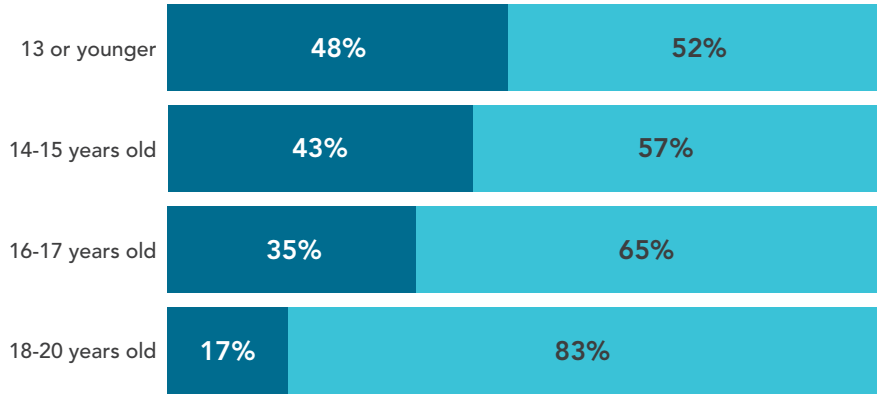
A majority of children were reported missing from their primary residence. This could either be the home of a family member, the home of another type of legal guardian, or a foster home.

Was This the Child's First Missing Incident?



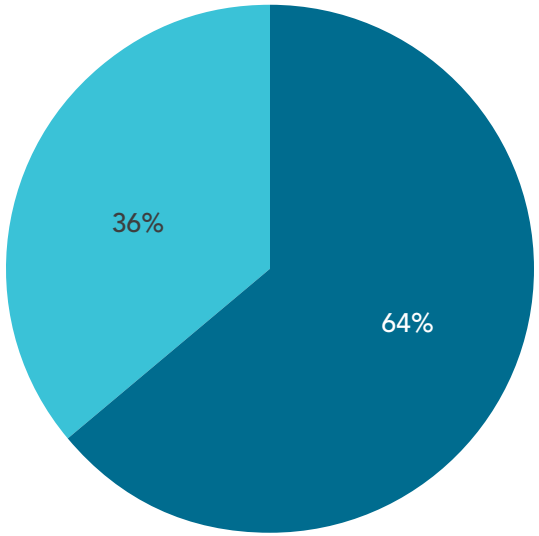
This only includes cases in which it was possible to determine if this was the child's first missing incident (340 cases).

Was This the Child's First Missing Incident?: By Age Group

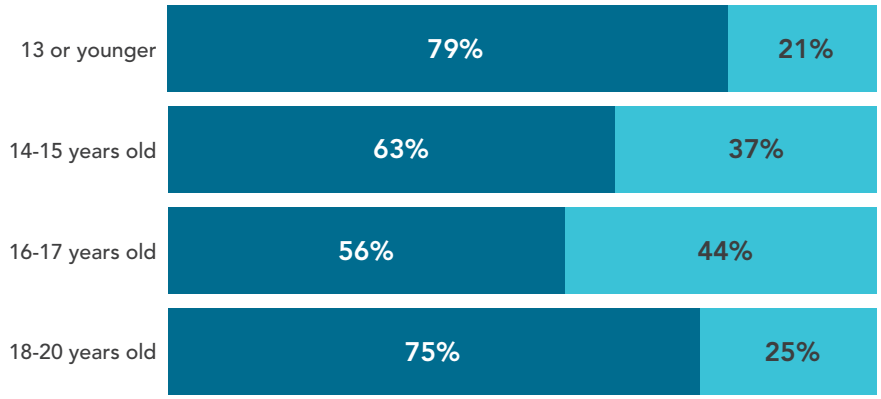


This was their first missing incident for 40% of these children. It was more likely to be their first missing incident if they were younger.

Travel Method



Travel Method: By Age Group



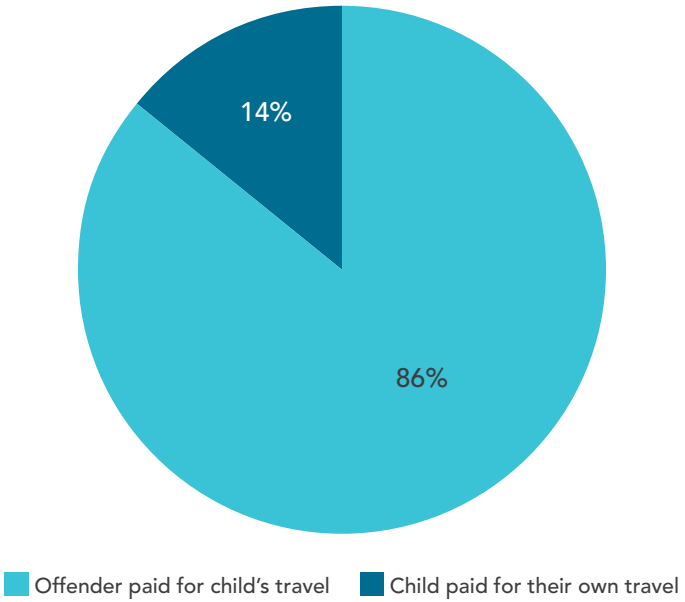
Offender traveled to the child | The child traveled to the offender

These charts only include cases in which the travel method was known (195 cases).

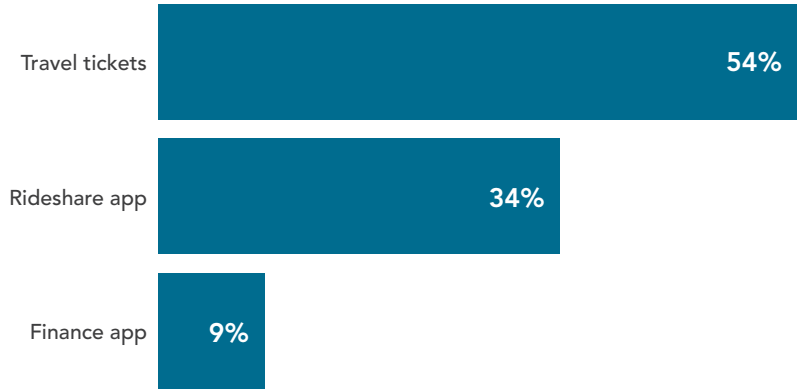
Offenders employed multiple methods to facilitate the child's abduction. They could travel to the child in order to abduct them, or the child could travel to the offender. Overall, it was more common for the offender to travel to the child (64%), and even more likely if they were 13 or younger (79% of this age group).

Older teens were more likely to travel to the offender as they were to have the offender to travel to them.

Child Traveled to the Offender: Who Paid for Travel?



Offender Paid for Travel: How was This Facilitated?



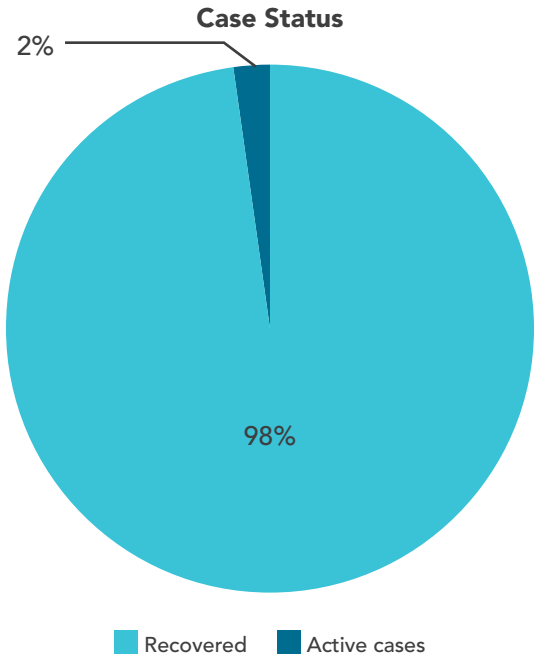
These charts only include cases in which the child traveled to an offender.

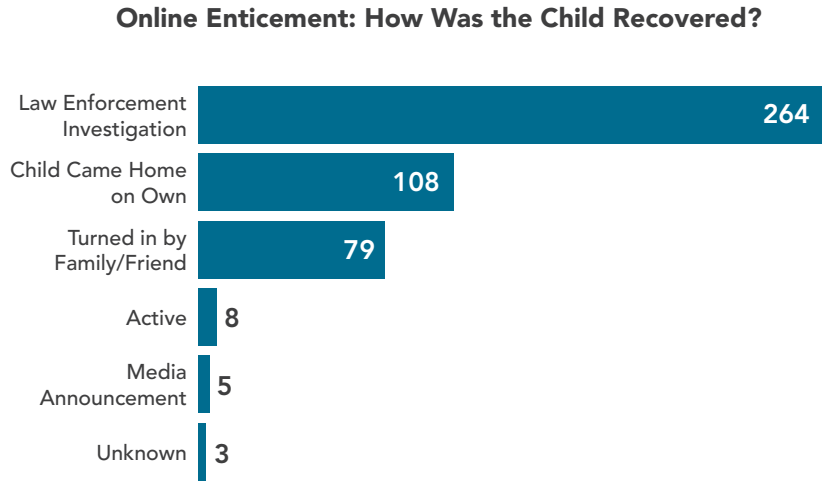
Even when a child traveled to an offender, the abduction was often facilitated by the offender in some way. Frequently this involved helping fund the child's travel via cash transferals through an app. This was also sometimes accompanied by advice on how the child could avoid being recovered while they were in transit.

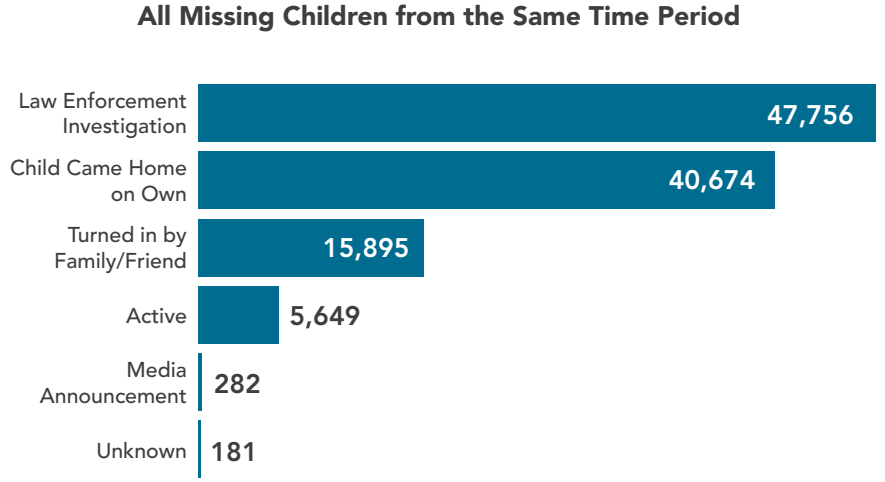
CASE EXAMPLE

A 14-year-old multiracial female child was having sexually explicit conversations with an offender on Discord and Instagram. The offender arranged for a rideshare to bring the child to his location. The child deleted accounts and blocked friends and family. However, law enforcement was able to recover her after she opened a Snapchat account with information that indicated her location.

Recovery Circumstances

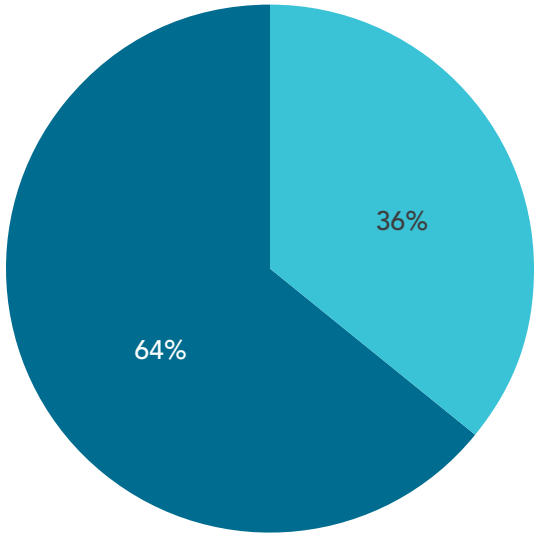




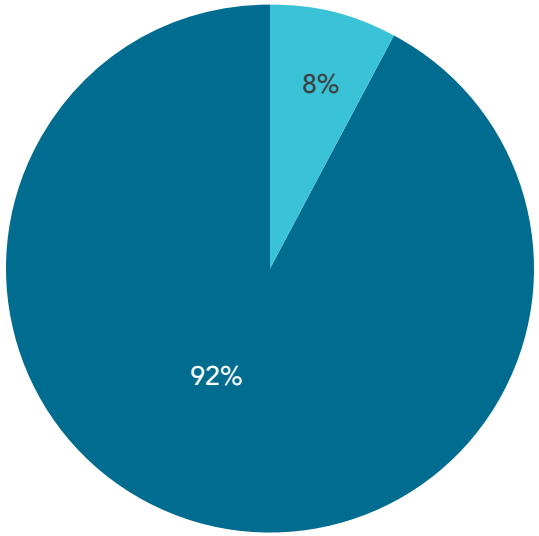


Recovery Location and Distance Traveled

Online Enticement: Recovery Location



All Missing Children from the Same Time Period: Recovery Location

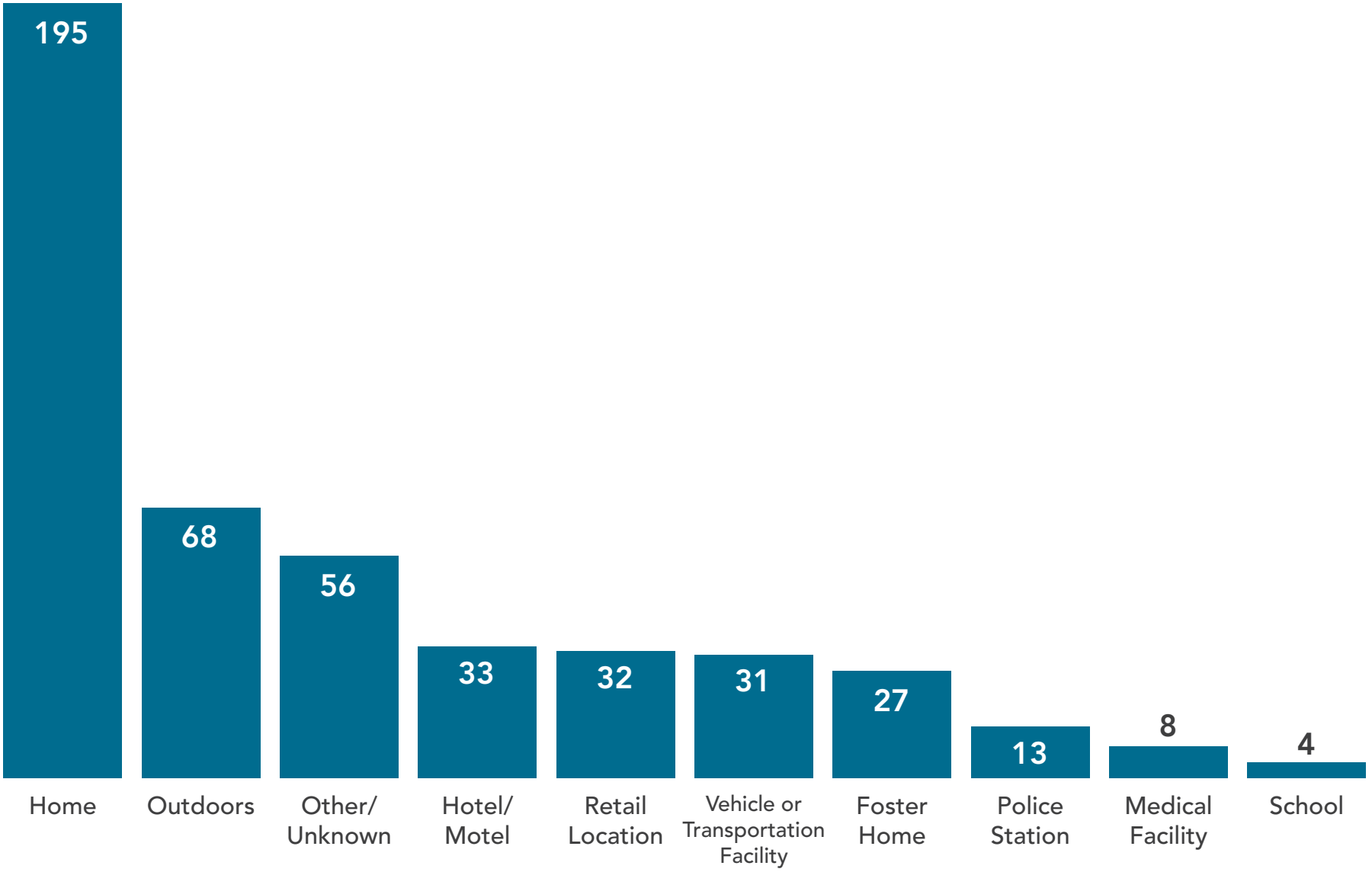


Recovered in a different state Recovered in same state

This chart does not include Family Abductions and Lost, Injured, or Otherwise Missing children because these case types were not present for any online enticement cases.

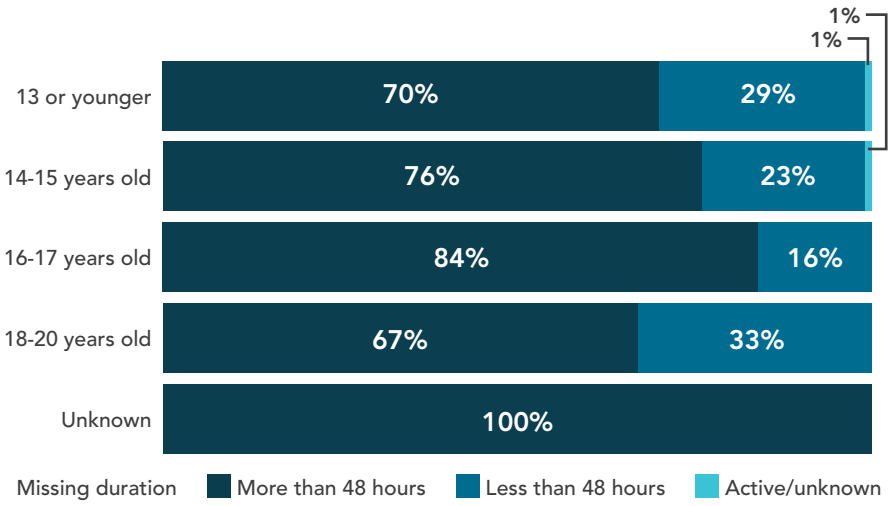
Although nearly all (98%) of the children missing due to online enticement were recovered, they often traveled a great distance before being returned home or being located. Over a third (36%) were recovered in a different state than their missing state. This was a much greater proportion than all children reported missing during this same time period (8%).

Online Enticement: Type of Recovery Location



Missing Duration

Missing Duration by Age

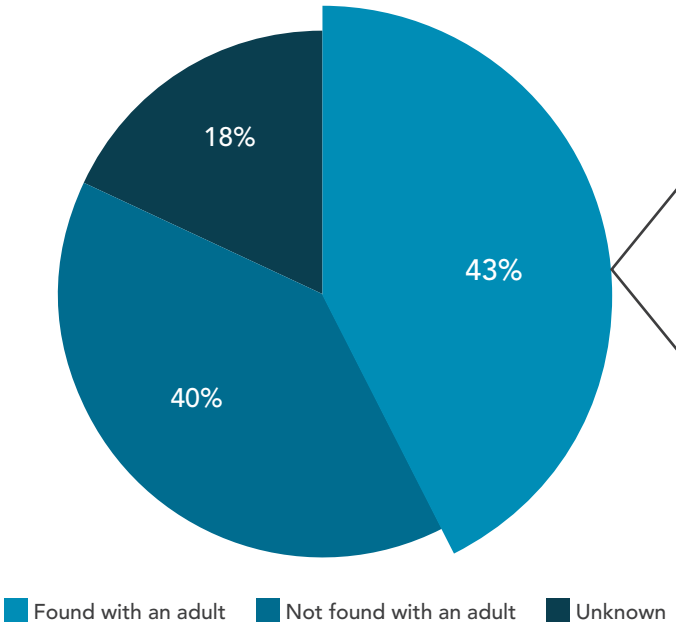


Missing from Care and Missing Duration

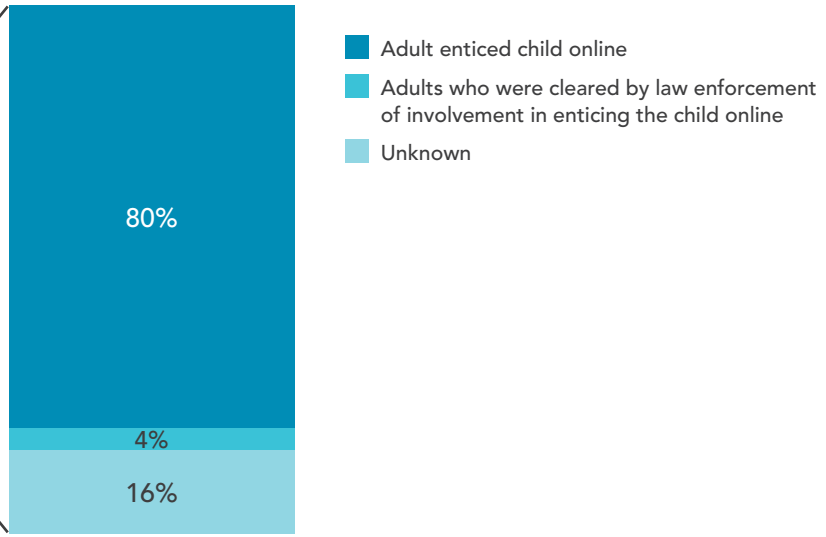


Children were more likely to be recovered within 48 hours if they were 13 years old or younger. Children were also more likely to have a shorter missing duration if they were not missing from care. Children overall had a mean missing duration of 31 days.

Was the Child Found with an Adult?



Adult Found with Child: Did the Adult Entice the Child?



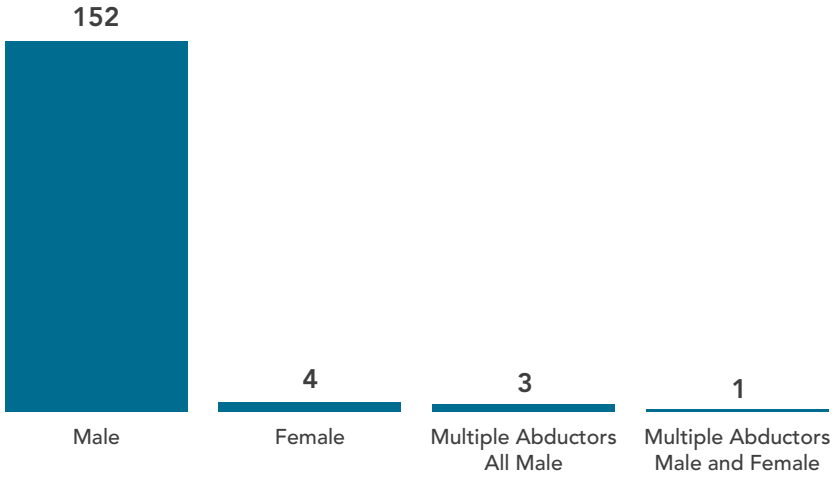
It could be difficult to determine the circumstances of the missing incident if the child returned home on their own or was recovered by family. That being said, 43% of the children were recovered in the company of an adult, and 80% of these adults were verified by law enforcement to have enticed the child online.

CASE EXAMPLE

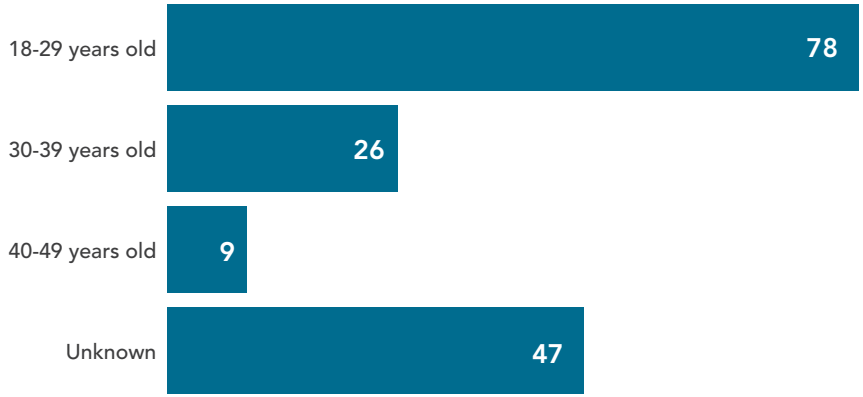
A 15-year-old White female child met a male in his twenties on an unknown online gaming site. They had conversations about getting her to travel to his location in a different state. The male also sent her a credit card with money deposited on it. During the child's missing incident she was sending text messages to her mother, and law enforcement was able to use these to track the child's location. She was recovered with the offender. During the missing incident, the offender had recorded CSAM depicting the child.

Offender Demographics

Found with Adult Met Online: Offender's Gender



Found with Adult Met Online: Offender's Age Range



These charts are only comprised of data pertaining to adults who enticed the child online and the child was recovered in the company of this offender.

Although offenders were typically younger adults with the highest proportion between the ages of 20 and 29, they also tended to be much older than the child. They had a median age difference of 10 years and a mean age difference of 13 years. A plurality of offenders (41%) were more than 10 years older than the child. The largest age difference was 48 years. Large age gaps such as this have a tendency to create power imbalances, thereby increasing the danger these children face during their missing incidents.

CASE EXAMPLE

A 15-year-old White female child was picked up by a female offender she met on Instagram. The offender then drove the child to a different state. The offender offered to buy the child clothing if she would have sex with her. The child was recovered after she turned herself in.

Conclusion

Despite the relatively small population in this report, it's possible to discern certain trends and patterns when it comes to online enticement. First and foremost is the higher proportion of younger children in this dataset, possibly due to the proliferation of smart phones and the abundance of social media and other messaging sites. Smart phones have also made it easier for offenders to discreetly facilitate the abduction of a child in regard to travel expenses – it is possible for children to form an emotional connection to someone hundreds of miles away, and offenders exploited that.

Female children made up the majority of children in this report who were enticed online, but male children were not exempt from online exploitation, either. While female children were more likely to meet an offender in person, **there has been an uptick in online sextortion of teenage boys,** which can happen without the child ever meeting his offender in person. NCMEC's website has more information about sextortion here: **NCMEC.org/sextortion.**

Resources

NetSmartz®

NCMEC offers a variety of free resources to support the education of parents, caregivers, teachers, child welfare professionals and others engaged in supporting the development of protective factors in children and teens through **NetSmartz**. NetSmartz is NCMEC's age and developmentally appropriate online safety education program designed to help teach children to be safer online with the goal of helping children become more aware of potential online risks and empowering them to help prevent victimization by making safer choices on- and offline.

Take It Down

NATIONAL CENTER FOR MISSING & EXPLOITED CHILDREN®
CyberTipline
CyberTipline.org • 1-800-THE-LOST®

NCMEC also offers a variety of resources for children who have been enticed online in order to help them on the road to recovery. **Take It Down** is a free service that can help anyone under the age of 18 at the time of their victimization remove or stop the online sharing of nude, partially nude or sexually explicit images or videos taken. NCMEC also offers resources and education on sextortion, and we support families and victims through our **Team HOPE** program. Additionally, NCMEC's **CyberTipline** is the place to report child sexual exploitation. It is secure and easy to use, and you can provide as much or as little information as you want.

Disclaimers and Definitions

The information provided in this report does not reflect all cases of missing or abducted children, only those reported to NCMEC. As the national clearinghouse for missing and exploited children, NCMEC encourages agencies and families to report any missing-child case to receive assistance and resources.

Case Status:

Active – Cases are categorized as active when a child is still missing and law enforcement has an active police report on the child's disappearance or alternatively for certain international cases if a Hague application is on file with the U.S. State Department.

Resolved – Cases are categorized as resolved when any of the following criteria are met: the child returns home to their parent or legal guardian; the child will remain in the custody of law enforcement; or the child is in contact with their parent or legal guardian but will not be returning home and the parents/legal guardian and law enforcement are satisfied with the situation. A child's case can only be labeled recovered/deceased if their body has been found and they have been positively identified.

Case Types:

Endangered runaway or ERU –
Any missing child between 11 and 17 years of age who is missing of his or her own accord and whose whereabouts are unknown to his or her parent(s) or legal guardian.

Family Abduction or FA –
A family abduction is defined as the taking, retention or concealment of a child, younger than 18 years of age, by a parent, other person with a family relationship to the child, or his or her agent, in violation of the custody rights, including visitation rights of a parent or legal guardian.

Lost, injured or otherwise missing or LIM –
Lost, injured or otherwise missing is defined as any missing child younger than the age of 18 where there are insufficient facts to determine the cause of the child's disappearance or any child 10 years of age or younger who is missing on his or her own accord.

Missing Young Adult –
A missing person 18 years of age or older but younger than the age of 21. This category is derived from Suzanne's Law, a provision in the PROTECT Act of 2003 (codified at 34 U.S.C. § 41307), which extends to missing young adults the same reporting and law enforcement response requirements already provided for children younger than 18 years of age.

Nonfamily abduction or NFA –
A nonfamily abduction is defined as the unauthorized taking, retention, luring, confinement or concealment of a child younger than the age of 18 by someone other than a family member.

NCMEC.org

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