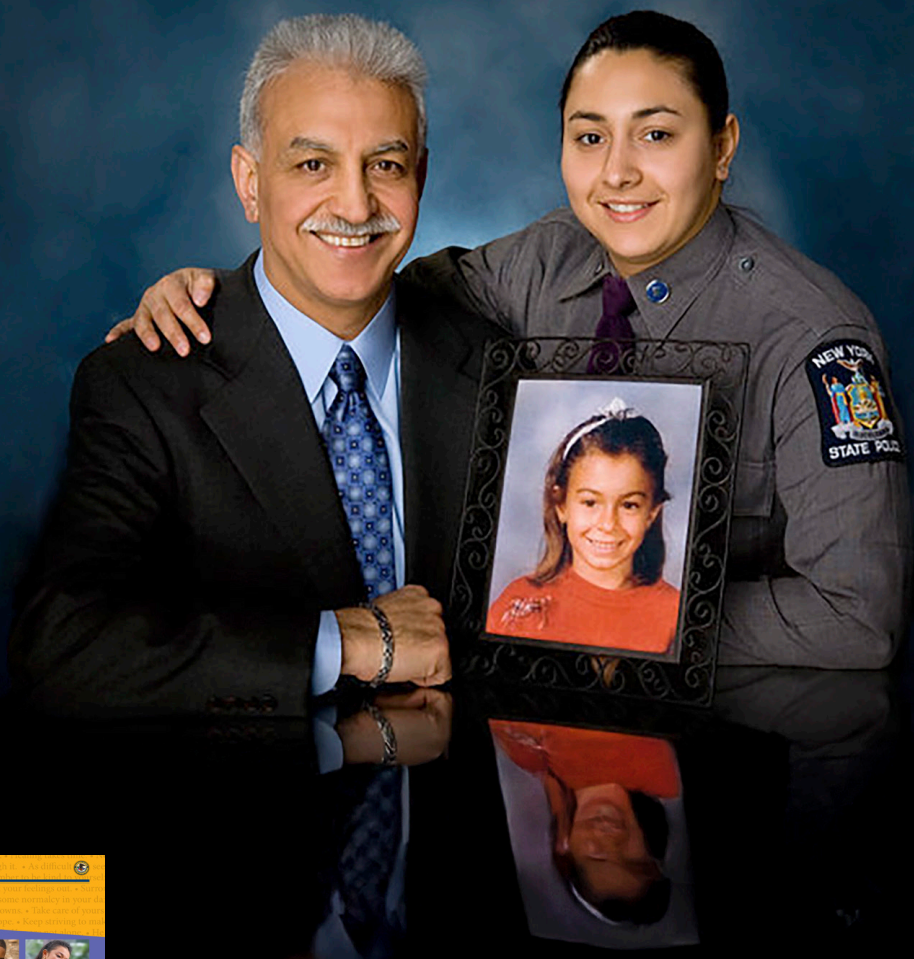
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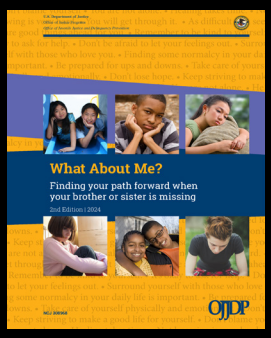
THE AMBER ADVOCATE

Kindred Spirits

Siblings of missing children team up to help families facing similar traumas—not only to survive, but thrive

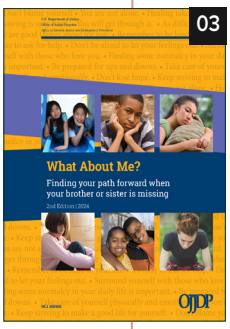


Sayeh Rivazfar, a sibling survival guide contributor and New York State Police veteran, pays tribute to her late sister, Sara, with their father, child advocate Ahmad Rivazfar.

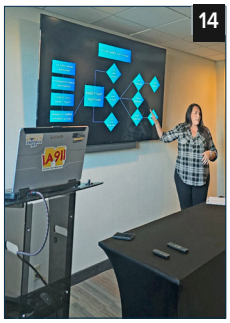


The newly updated, multimedia guide ***What About Me?*** provides sibling survivors' powerful stories, invaluable advice, and the latest resources for searching families and child protection professionals

AMBER® ALERT









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EDITORS' NOTES

In the print edition, words and phrases in **bold purple** denote hyperlinks for content sources and additional details. To interact with hyperlinks, visit **AMBERAdvocate.org** to download a PDF of current and past issues.

Have a story idea for us? We'd love to hear from you. Email **askamber@fvtc.edu**.

THE AMBER ADVOCATE

Bonnie Ferenbach
Executive Editor

Denise Gee Peacock
Managing Editor, Designer

Jody Garlock
Rebecca Sherman
Contributing Editors

Whitecap Interactive
Website Administration

AMBER® ALERT TRAINING & Technical Assistance PROGRAM

Janell Rasmussen
Administrator

Byron Fassett
Jenniffer Price-Lehmann
Deputy Administrators

AMBER Alert Training & Technical Assistance Program information:
AMBERAdvocate.org
askamber@fvtc.edu
877-71-AMBER (877-712-6237)

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By Denise Gee Peacock

Kindred Spirits

Siblings of missing children collaborate to help others in the newly updated resource guide *What About Me?*

While searching for their missing child, parents carry a heavy load—assisting law enforcement, rallying media and public interest in the case, and working to keep food on the table—all while not completely unraveling. But another group of family members is also struggling: the missing child's siblings.



As sibling survivor Trevor Wetterling recalls, "People would always ask, 'How are your parents doing?' And I'd think, 'What about me? Don't they care how I'm doing?'" Meanwhile, he says, "I'd come home from school, and everyone was sitting around being quiet. No one would tell me what was going on."

Like other sibling survivors, Trevor's feelings stem not from self-centeredness, but from a need to validate his own trauma, his own sense of worth.

Trevor is the brother of Jacob Wetterling, an 11-year-old who was kidnapped at gunpoint by a masked man in 1988. Trevor was with Jacob when the abduction occurred, making the ordeal even more traumatic. The Wetterling family spent nearly three decades searching for Jacob until 2016, when his killer divulged to law enforcement where the boy's body could be found. This, of course, came as another blow.

Trevor and his sisters, Amy and Carmen, are three of 16 sibling survivors of missing children willing to talk candidly about the challenges they faced—and sometimes continue to reckon with. If struggling siblings are lucky, they'll find support from well-trained professionals. If they're even luckier, they'll find strength from those who truly understand their needs: Fellow survivors—whom Zach Svendgard calls "our chosen family."

Zack is the brother of Jessika Svendgard, an honor student who, at age 15, left home after receiving a bad grade. Alone and vulnerable, she was lured into the hands of sex traffickers until she could break free from her abusers. Zack appreciates Jessika's strength—and works to share it. "The world is a heavy thing to try to balance all on our own shoulders," he says. "But powerful things can happen when kind people are enabled to take action."

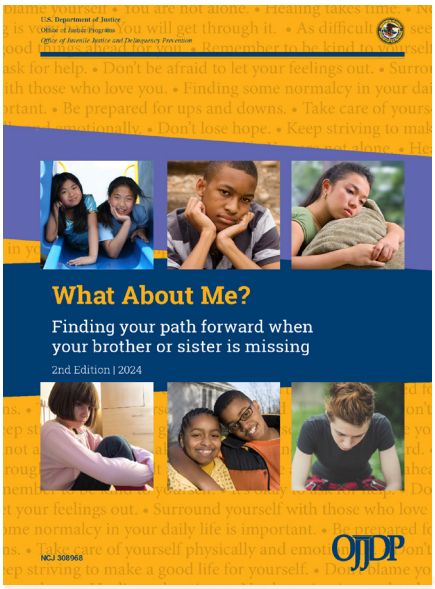
The action these siblings have taken is helping update a comprehensive resource for children going through similar struggles: the multimedia guide, *What About Me? Finding Your Path Forward When Your Brother or Sister Is Missing*.

Find the resources: Download a PDF of *What About Me?*, read the updated guide online, and view videos from the sibling contributors at **familysurvival.amberadvocate.org.**

The new 98-page ***What About Me?*** is the second edition of a guide first published in 2007. It was spearheaded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) / Office of Justice Programs (OJP) of the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ). Its development was overseen by the AMBER Alert Training & Technical Assistance Program (AATTAP) / National Criminal Justice Training Center (NCJTC) of Fox Valley Technical College.

Contributors to *What About Me?* bring clarity to the complex needs siblings face: Children in families with missing siblings can't easily process what they're experiencing. They aren't hearing the particulars from law enforcement. They aren't trained to respond to an intrusive or hurtful question from the media. They don't know how to navigate their frayed family dynamics. And they need help.

The guide provides tangible ways that siblings of missing children can handle stress, the investigative process, and media interactions. It also can help them express their needs to their loved ones and family advocates, and find helpful resources during either a short or prolonged period of uncertainty, fear, and grief.



What About Me? focal points

- When home is not the same
- Mental health: a new normal
- Navigating family dynamics
- Routines, school, and work
- Holidays and traditions
- Working with law enforcement and the media
- When a missing sibling returns
- Sibling-contributor stories, and their messages of hope
- Resources for finding help
- Writing and art exercises to help younger children express emotions

What About Me? features the voices and perspectives of eight sibling contributors while weaving in advice from seven other siblings who participated in the first edition. It also reflects the expertise of DOJ/AATTAP/NCJTC subject matter experts, child/victim advocates, and relevant, credible U.S. agencies that can help.

The sibling contributors have survived vastly different experiences: Some have missing siblings who were kidnapped by strangers or abducted by family members, while others have siblings who ran away or were lured away from home. Some of their siblings were found safe and returned home. One contributor is herself a victim of a horrific abduction and assault—in which her younger sister was murdered. Others have siblings whose whereabouts still remain unknown, or they were found deceased.

Continues on page 7





Left: *Sibling contributors to the new edition of* What About Me? *(from left): Rysa, Amy, Zach, Kimber, Carmen, Cory, and Sayeh.* ***Right:*** *Contributors to the first edition (front row, from left): Erika, Heather, and Carmen; (back row, from left) Marcus, Martha, Trevor, Amy, and Robin.*

The new guide's sibling contributors

Kimber Biggs, sister of Mikelle Biggs (Arizona)

Kimber was 9 when her 11-year-old sister, Mikelle, was kidnapped on January 2, 1999, while riding her bike near their family's Arizona home. Mikelle was never seen again. Since then, Kimber has spent 25 years advocating on her sister's behalf. Through the Facebook page **Justice for Mikelle Biggs**, Kimber shares updates on Mikelle's case to more than 29,000 followers. Also, since late 2023, Kimber has **worked** as an AATTAP-NCJTC Associate, providing her powerful family perspective to investigators learning how to best work with victims' families in missing persons cases. "It has taken a lot of work and therapy to get to the place I am today," she says. She also remains hopeful that her sister's case will be solved. "A new detective has been assigned to what was a very cold case," she told attendees at the 2024 National AMBER Alert and AMBER Alert in Indian Country Symposium. "The fact that he's eyeing a significant suspect in the case makes it feel like something is finally happening."

Rysa Lee, sister of Maayimuna "Muna" N'Diaye (Alabama)

Rysa was 14 when her 4-year-old sister, "Muna," was abducted by her biological father to Mali, West Africa, on December 27, 2011. Rysa and Muna's mother, Dr. Noelle Hunter, began a relentless **campaign** to bring "Muna" home—which thankfully occurred in July 2014. Since then, the family has tirelessly advocated on behalf of international parental child abduction (IPCA) cases via the organization they founded, the **iStandParent Network**. While her sister's IPCA case was relatively short, "that year and a half was by far the most difficult and longest time of my life," Rysa says. "To this day, I have never felt as empty and distraught as I felt during that time. The fact that my youngest sister was across an ocean and not in the room next to me sleeping every night was incredibly painful." Rysa found comfort in high school band and color guard participation, listening to music, "and leaning on my friends to cope." She currently works in banking and attends the University of Alabama in Huntsville, where her mother, an assistant professor of political science, oversees the International Child Abduction Prevention and Research Office (and contributed to the *Family Survival Guide).*

Cory Redwine, brother of Dylan Redwine (Colorado)

On November 18, 2012, Cory was 20 years old when his 13-year-old younger brother, Dylan, traveled to stay with their father on a scheduled court-ordered visit. The next day his father would report Dylan as missing. The teen's whereabouts remained unknown until 2017, when his father was **convicted** of second-degree murder and child abuse in Dylan's death. Before then, Cory and his family spent nearly a decade searching for Dylan. They have since spent years seeking justice for him and educating others about the legal loopholes in parental custody issues that can prove deadly. (Cory and Dylan's mother, Elaine Hall, is now an AATTAP/NCJTC Associate who discusses her family's case with law enforcement; she also contributed to the *Family Survival Guide.)* Cory recalls the court process being "long and arduous; it brought up so many emotions for me. But it also made me realize that I am stronger than I thought I was, that my voice and words are powerful," he says. Now a father of two, Cory finds it an honor to helps adults facing difficult situations. "My experience, different as it is from theirs, allows me to help them through challenging times and come out better on the other side."

Sayeh Rivazfar, sister of Sara Rivazfar (New York)

After her parents' divorce in 1985, Sayeh and her younger siblings had "child welfare officials in and out of our home due to physical and mental abuse at the hands of our mother and others," Sayeh says. "Unfortunately, [our mother] thought having men in our lives would help us. But her boyfriends weren't all good. In fact, one **changed** our lives forever in the worst way imaginable." In the middle of the night of September 22, 1988, one of those boyfriends took the sisters from their home, drove to a remote area, brutally assaulted both girls and left them to die. Sayeh, then 8 years old, survived. Sara, age 6, did not. "From that day forward, I felt guilty for surviving and had dreams of saving my sister from this nightmare," Sayeh says. "I was determined to bring her killer to justice." Thankfully she was able to do just that. >>



Mikelle Biggs, left, and Kimber



Rysa Lee, left, and "Muna" N'Diaye



Dylan Redwine, left, and Cory



Sayeh Rivazfar, left, and Sara

>> She and her brother, Aresh, moved to Rochester, New York, to live with their father, Ahmad (now a nationally known child protection advocate and *Family Survival Guide* contributor). Sayeh's passion to help others, especially children, inspired her to join the New York State Police force, from which she recently retired after two decades of child protection and investigative work. She now focuses on being a good mother to her son. "I'm proud of the work I've done, and even prouder of the children I've helped," she says. "The story never ends, but it can have a better ending than one might think."

Heather Bish, sister of Molly Bish (Massachusetts)

On June 27, 2000, Heather's 16-year-old sister, Molly, went missing while working as a lifeguard. Molly's disappearance led to the most extensive search for a missing person in Massachusetts history. In June 2003, Molly's remains were found five miles from her home in Warren. While the investigation into her sister's murder **continues**, Heather uses social media to help law enforcement generate leads and "share her story—our story," she says. Heather was supportive of her parents' work to create the **Molly Bish Foundation**, dedicated to protecting children. "I carry that legacy on today," she says. She has filed familial DNA legislation for unresolved cases and advocates for DNA analyses for these types of crimes. She also has served on the Massachusetts Office of Victim Assistance Board and was part of the state's Missing Persons Task Force. "As a mother and a teacher, my hope is that children never have to experience a tragedy like this."

Zack Svendgard, brother of Jessika Svendgard (Washington)

In 2010, Zack's younger sister, **Jessika**, first ran away, and then was lured away from their family home near Seattle. As a result, the 15-year-old became a victim of sex trafficking. It took 108 days for Jessika to return to her family and get the help she needed, Zack says. "Her recovery in many ways was just the beginning. In many ways the broken person who came home was not the little girl who had left." Jessika's ordeal has been featured in the documentaries "I Am Jane Doe" and "The Long Night." She and her mother, Nacole, have become powerful advocates for victims of sex trafficking and instrumental in passing legislation to increase victim rights, issue harsher punishments for sex offenders, and shut down websites that facilitate sex trafficking. (Nacole is an AATTAP/NCJTC Associate who provides her family perspective to law enforcement; she also contributed to the *Family Survival Guide.)* "We've joined organizations such as **Team HOPE** [of the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children/NCMEC] to provide counseling to others, and are ourselves committed to therapy and self care."

Amy & Carmen Wetterling, brother of Jacob (Minnesota)

On October 22, 1989, Amy and Carmen's brother, 11-year-old Jacob, was abducted at gunpoint by a masked man while riding his bike with his younger brother, Trevor, and a family friend. His whereabouts were unknown for nearly three decades, but on September 1, 2016, Jacob's remains were found after his killer **confessed** to the crime. Jacob's abduction had an enormous impact—not only on his family, but also on people throughout the Midwest, who lost their sense of safety. Amy, Carmen, and Trevor have been inspired to help others by their mother, Patty Wetterling. Patty has shared countless victim impact sessions with law enforcement across the U.S. (many of them AATTAP/NCJTC trainings). She is co-founder and past director NCMEC's Team HOPE, co-author of the 2023 book, ***Dear Jacob: A Mother's Journey of Hope***, and a contributor to the *Family Survival Guide*. "Jacob inspires us every day," Amy says. "He believed in a fair and just world, a world where all children know they are special and deserve to be safe." Adds Carmen, "Jacob believed that people were good. And he lived his life centered on 11 simple **traits**."

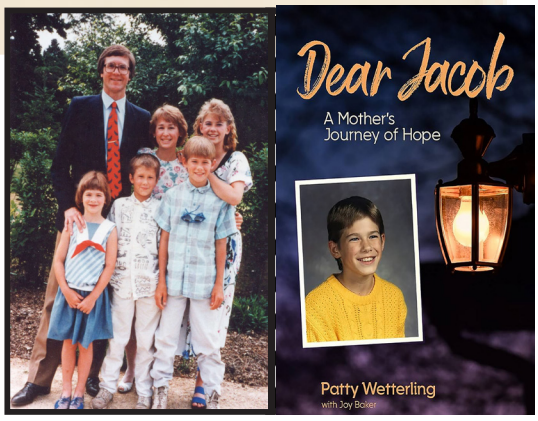
Additional contributors: Learn about the siblings who shared their advice for the 2007 **first edition** of ***What About Me? Coping With the Abduction of a Brother or Sister*** **here**.



Heather Bish, left, and Molly



Zack Svendgard, left, and Jessika



The Wetterling family with Jacob (front right) and mother Patty Wetterling's memoir





Left: *Guided by project coordinator Helen Connelly, far right, the sibling survivors discuss what should go into the updated guide.* ***Right:*** *Zack Svendgard photographs meeting notes.* ***Below:*** *A video still of Rysa Lee.*

Continued from page 4

To produce *What About Me?*, OJJDP/OJP tapped the AATTAP publications team led by Bonnie Ferenbach, and NCJTC Associate Helen Connelly to coordinate the project. The group also played key roles in updating ***When Your Child Is Missing: A Family Survival Guide***, released in 2023.

Connelly is a longtime advocate for missing children and their families. In 2005, while serving as a senior consultant for the U.S. Department of Justice, Connelly and Ron Laney, then Associate Administrator of OJJDP's Child Protection Division, teamed up to produce the first-ever sibling survival guide, ***What About Me? Coping With the Abduction of a Brother or Sister,*** published in 2007.

"Through Helen and Ron's vision and compassion, this guide, as well as numerous other resources, have provided support, encouragement, help, and resources needed by so many families," says AATTAP Administrator Janell Rasmussen.

With Connelly's encouragement, past and present sibling contributors participated in writing the guide because they recognize shared pain—and potential dilemmas.

"Trauma, if left untreated, can manifest itself in harmful ways later in life," says sibling contributor Heather Bish.



Hope, healing & helping others
Watch the sibling survivors discuss their stories and **read** their advice to others.

The sibling survivors who worked on the updated resource valued the chance to collaborate with others in "the club nobody wants to belong to," says Heather, who contributed to both editions. "But our experiences are special," adds contributor Rysa Lee. "We have the tools that can help others."

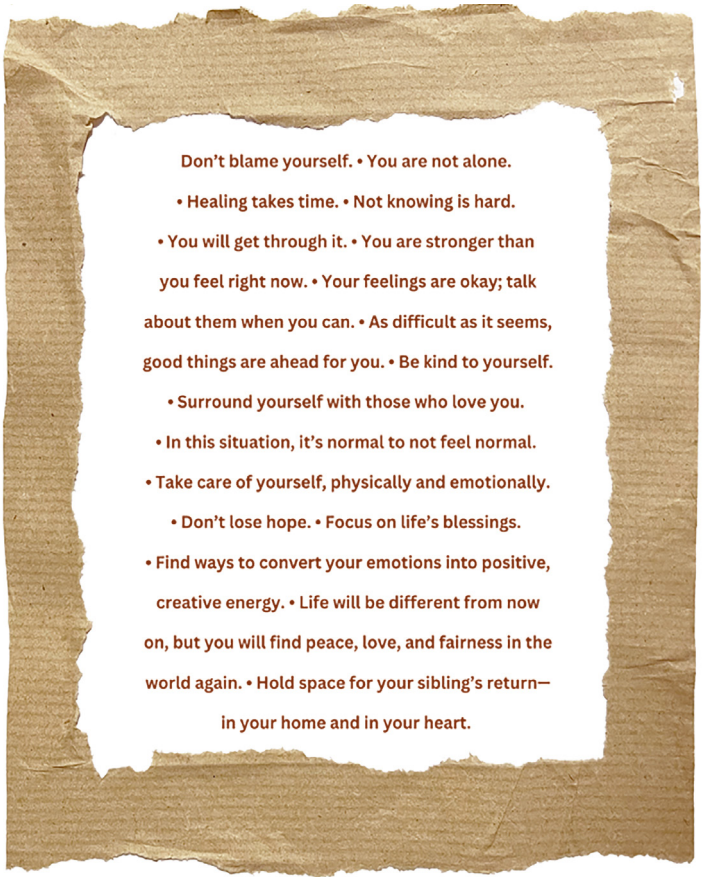
At the project's start, the siblings met virtually before gathering in person in Salt Lake City in January 2024. There, they bonded, and wholeheartedly shared their experiences and advice on camera for the new edition's companion videos. "Working with the other siblings of missing persons left me shocked at the outcomes they had; in some way, they each had answers," says contributor Kimber Biggs. "It was comforting to know that getting answers is even possible."

Content talks continued, and the guide began to take shape. Then, on May 22, 2024, a powerful two-hour roundtable was held at OJJDP offices after the National Missing Children's Day ceremony in Washington, D.C.

The siblings agree that "there is no right or wrong way to survive, it is just our own," Heather says. "We hope that sharing our experiences will empower other siblings to forge ahead, and possibly empower someone else to do the same."

Each of the sibling contributors discussed their lives now as social workers, teachers, and counselors. Contributor Sayeh Rivazfar has dedicated two decades of her life to serving in law enforcement, investigating crimes against children, before her retirement two years ago. Sayeh doesn't think of herself as a victim or survivor: "It's more than that. I see myself more as a thriver, despite the odds." She credits this to the love and support she has received over the years from family members, friends, and caring professionals.

"A guide like this would have been so helpful to us," she says. "But we hope that now, with its help, with our help, children can know they are not alone. That we care about them, and want them to thrive too." Rysa adds another positive take. There *is* light to be found in the darkness of tumult, she says. "Siblings do come home, and my family is living proof."



WORDS OF WISDOM
Click **here** to download a PDF of this advice from the sibling survivors. Share it with anyone searching for a loved one.

"Updating two major family resource guides over the last few years has strengthened our understanding of, and empathy for, anyone experiencing the nightmare of having a missing family member. The guides' contributors cannot be sufficiently thanked for their profound, heartfelt work. It inspires us to strive even harder to bring their experiences, lessons learned, and other important messages to those who most need it: helping professionals.

Janell Rasmussen
AATTAP Administrator



Sibling-survivor contributor and AATTAP/NCJTC Associate Kimber Biggs shares her family's story at the 2024 National AMBER Alert and AMBER Alert in Indian Country Symposium.

Helpful advice for the helpers

What About Me? includes a **detailed section** of important guidance relating to law enforcement and judicial processes. It also provides tips for navigating traditional media and social media. When working with families, consider these insights from the sibling contributors.

During a law enforcement investigation

- Siblings "may have a law enforcement officer with little or no experience with a missing children case, seems uncomfortable and distant, or someone who jumps in with both feet," says Sayeh Rivazfar. The retired law enforcement professional is the survivor of a heinous crime against her and her sister, Sara, who did not survive. *(Read about their story on page 5.)* Sayeh advises other survivors, "If you want to talk to a different officer, speak up. Members of law enforcement want to do their very best."
- Children are especially confused by law enforcement's intrusion upon their home and being asked what seems like invasive questions. Help them understand that this is normal—either directly or with the help of a family/child advocate.
- "Just because you don't hear about progress doesn't mean they're not making any," one sibling notes. Try to schedule regular check-in calls with the family. Let families know that while law enforcement won't be able to share every detail of the investigation, they can do their best to keep the family apprised of the work being done, and to keep lines of communication open and productive.
- If children are expressing anger toward their parents, emphasize to them that "your parents are still your parents, they still love you, and they care about your feelings—even if they can't show it right now," the contributors say.
- Be prepared for such questions as:
  - >> ***How do I handle phone calls during the search?***
  - >> ***How should we handle our missing sibling's social media and email accounts?***
  - >> ***Can I still go into my sibling's room?***
  - >> ***Will we get their belongings back?***



PHOTO (SAYEH RIVAZFAR): MAKENNA RIVAZFAR

Sibling contributor Sayeh Rivazfar—a retired 20-year veteran of the New York State Police—with her son

Working with traditional/social media

- There's no such thing as "off the record," contributors say.
- To foster compassionate, quality reporting "find the journalist who provides compassion and truth, and give them an exclusive interview," Sayeh advises.
- With nonstop anonymous, uniformed sources providing running commentary on social media tell children to "be prepared for both positive and negative responses," Rysa Lee says.
- Propose potential answers to commonly asked media questions that often make children uncomfortable:

  Do you think your sibling is still alive? *I hope so.*
  What happened? *I don't know, and I don't want to talk about it with you.*
  Was your brother or sister sexually abused? *I don't know, but it's not something I want to discuss.*
  How does this situation make you feel? *I don't want to talk about my feelings right now.*

By Jody Garlock

Eyes in the Sky

The dramatic rescue of a pajama-clad girl from the dark and dangerous piney woods of Louisiana shines a light on cutting-edge drone technology in the search for missing children.





PHOTOS: (DRONE) DRONE MANAGEMENT SERVICES; (RESCUER) WEBSTER PARISH SHERIFF'S OFFICE

On the afternoon of Sunday, September 15, 2024, a call came into the Webster Parish Sheriff's Office (WSPO) in Minden, Louisiana: 10-year-old Peyton Saintignan was missing.

The girl had seemingly vanished while sleepwalking. This was something she had reportedly done inside her Dubberly home (35 miles east of Shreveport), but she had never left the house. Family members and neighbors had already spent an hour searching for the brown-haired girl, who was last seen at bedtime the previous night. With dense woods and dangerous wildlife such as wild hogs and rattlesnakes in the area, authorities knew that bringing Peyton to safety required quick action.

As the Sheriff's Office dispatched its resources, the Louisiana State Police issued a Level II Endangered/Missing Child Advisory—a notification of a child believed to be in danger, but whose case doesn't meet the criteria for an AMBER Alert.

The intensive 10-hour search that ensued brought together numerous law enforcement agencies, Homeland Security, and hundreds of volunteers. Tracking dogs, off-road vehicles, a helicopter, and aerial surveillance drones were all activated. But it would be a drone equipped with cutting-edge thermal technology that saved the day—and the girl.

At around 10:30 p.m. that evening, the operator set up his specialized equipment and onward and upward the drone went. Remarkably, within about 20 minutes, the drone's ability to detect heat signatures was penetrating what by then was extreme darkness—and zeroed in on Peyton in the piney woods.

The riveting rescue footage that went viral showed the pajama-clad girl curled up on the ground and then waking as rescuers approached her in the woodsy terrain. Local and national media alike recounted the happy ending. "Other than some mosquito bites, she was perfect," Webster Parish Sheriff Jason Parker told ABC's "Good Morning America." "It's truly a miracle."

The case spotlights not only the importance of enlisting emerging technology to find missing children, but also the need to engage the public: The drone operator who spotted the girl had traveled from out of state, volunteering his services after hearing the breaking news about the search.

Heat of the moment

In neighboring Arkansas, Josh Klober, who co-owns Drone Management Services in Magnolia, was watching a Sunday football game at his home when reports of the massive search in north Louisiana spread across the region. Knowing his drone's thermal-imaging camera could detect body heat with pinpoint accuracy, even in areas obscured by dense woods, the father of two felt compelled to make the 90-minute drive to the search area.

Klober offered his assistance and waited until authorities gave the go-ahead after a search helicopter finished its work. He set up his equipment, which included a generator and

Bienville (Louisiana) Parish Deputy Sheriff Jeremy Gros holds the 10-year-old after she was found safe in the woods. Gros was the first rescuer seen on the drone footage (see page 13). The grateful child hugged him after he helped her up from the ground, where she had been sleeping. She returned home safe—and, according to authorities, also hungry.

Hot topic

Drones with thermal cameras are becoming a must-have tool in missing persons searches. The drones, which can be deployed quickly and cover vast areas, can detect body heat, even if the person reported missing is in thick brush or dark conditions. The heat signature from the camera provides real-time intelligence to direct searchers to the location.



> I can't tell you how thrilled we all are to have a happy ending to this. A lot of prayers were answered.
>
> **Sheriff Jason Parker**
> Webster Parish (Louisiana) Sheriff's Office

a large flat-screen TV to monitor the drone footage in real time from the bed of his pickup truck. It was parked in the vicinity of where a hunter's trail camera had earlier captured an image of the wandering girl.

His strategy at piloting the drone was simple: Think like a child. "There's big, wooded areas around, but I'm trying to think like a 10-year-old," Klober told Arkansas' KNWA-TV. His hunch was that a child (albeit one who was sleepwalking) may not stray too far from the road, so he decided to contain his search within 40 yards of it.

Less than 30 minutes in, Klober could see a hot spot, which upon zooming in, revealed an image of the girl lying on the ground. The location was about 1½ miles from her home and 300 yards from where the trail camera recorded her.

Video footage shows how initial claps turned to silence when authorities gathered around the pickup truck realized the girl wasn't moving. Klober kept the drone's spotlight on her to guide rescuers to the exact location. As the TV screen showed Bienville Parish Deputy Sheriff Jeremy Gros making his way to her, the girl slowly raised her head. A joyful cry of "She's awake!" was followed by claps from the group around Klober's truck who were witnessing the rescue in real time. After the rescuer lifted her up from the ground, the grateful girl put her arms around his waist in a hug. "It was pretty emotional for everybody," Klober told **"Inside Edition."**

Once cleared by emergency medical services, Peyton returned home to her family.

Grateful community

The viral video of the rescue garnered thousands of comments from people impressed with the precision of the drone's thermal-imaging technology that cut through the dense, dark forest.

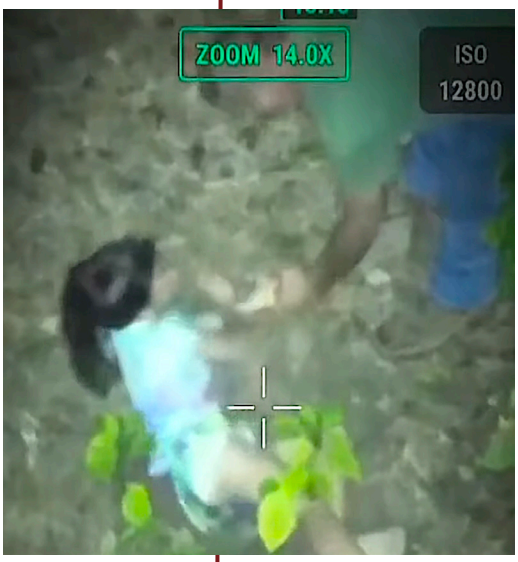
They also praised rescuers, including Klober, who was singled out as a hero. "Drone operator deserves a medal!" one person commented on YouTube. "How altruistic of him to take it upon himself to rush over, dedicate his time and effort." "Citizens helping other citizens—that's how it's done!" said another person.

The WPSO used its Facebook page to update the public on the story and



Drone operator Josh Klober, hailed a hero in the search, concentrates while a TV captures real-time images from the thermal camera. Zoomed-in footage, below, shows the girl curled up on the ground and then rising as Deputy Sheriff Gros approaches her.





PHOTOS: (SHERIFF/DRONE OPERATOR) WEBSTER COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE; (DRONE IMAGE STILLS) DRONE MANAGEMENT SERVICES

express gratitude to Klober, Drone Management Services, and the agencies and volunteers who helped search for and safely recover Peyton.

Klober stated in a local news **interview** that "there's a little bit of luck involved" in any type of drone search. "But whether someone else found her or we found her," he said, "I'm just glad she was found."

Sheriff Parker appeared more pragmatic about the recovery operation, praising it as a "truly cooperative effort."

Watch the remarkable drone rescue of the missing 10-year-old girl here.

By Jody Garlock

Communication Central

North Carolina AMBER Alert Coordinator Morrissa Ahl-Moyer's 911 telecommunicator work inspires her to help law enforcement work seamlessly and successfully when a child goes missing.



Fred Rogers' famous advice to "look for the helpers"—intended to steer children toward safety in times of chaos or tragedy—has endured for decades. And Morrissa Ahl-Moyer definitely falls into the category of a helper. Her 20-plus years in public safety took her from being a volunteer first responder, to a 911 telecommunicator, and now, Director and Clearinghouse Manager of the North Carolina Center for Missing Persons (**NCCMP**), a division of the state's Department of Public Safety based in Cary. The NCCMP receives more than 10,000 missing persons reports annually.

"I've always been a helper of sorts with my career choices," says Ahl-Moyer, whose job includes being North Carolina's AMBER Alert Coordinator (AAC). "For me now, it's getting to make sure troopers and dispatchers have what they need."

Since stepping into her role in June 2023, Ahl-Moyer has stepped up NCCMP's training, including working with law enforcement authorities to ensure they understand the state's AMBER Alert process and the online portal. Her outreach during her first year on the job included hosting a missing persons resources class in her hometown of Dunn, North Carolina, where she started as an EMT. To her surprise, more than 200 officers and public safety personnel showed up for the event. "It confirmed I was on the right track," Ahl-Moyer says. "It's training we need, and we need to do more of it."

> "Telecommunicators tend to be overlooked in the [AMBER Alert] decision-making process, but they can be the best source of information. They're truly the 'first' first responders—the ones who get the initial call when a child goes missing. And often they have the knowledge to say, 'Hey this might fit the criteria for an AMBER Alert.'
>
> **Morrissa Ahl-Moyer**
> Director/Clearinghouse Manager, NC Center for Missing Persons

That message is something she champions whether she's training law enforcement or participating in or attending state and national conferences.

We caught up with Ahl-Moyer when she was in another form of helper mode: voluntarily working night shifts at a communication center to lessen the load on 911 telecommunicators handling calls after Hurricane Helene's destruction in western North Carolina.

How does having 911 telecommunicator experience inform your AMBER Alert Coordinator (ACC) work?

As a telecommunicator who answered after-hours calls for NCCMP, I had a basic knowledge of how the alert process worked, the criteria, and the information needed before we contacted the AMBER Alert Coordinator for approval. I also recognized a knowledge gap. Most of the agencies had never requested an AMBER Alert before and weren't sure of the process. This was further exacerbated when there was a transition from faxing forms to an online portal. I've been working to ensure everyone knows how the process works.

How do you help people understand AMBER Alerts and other endangered missing advisories?

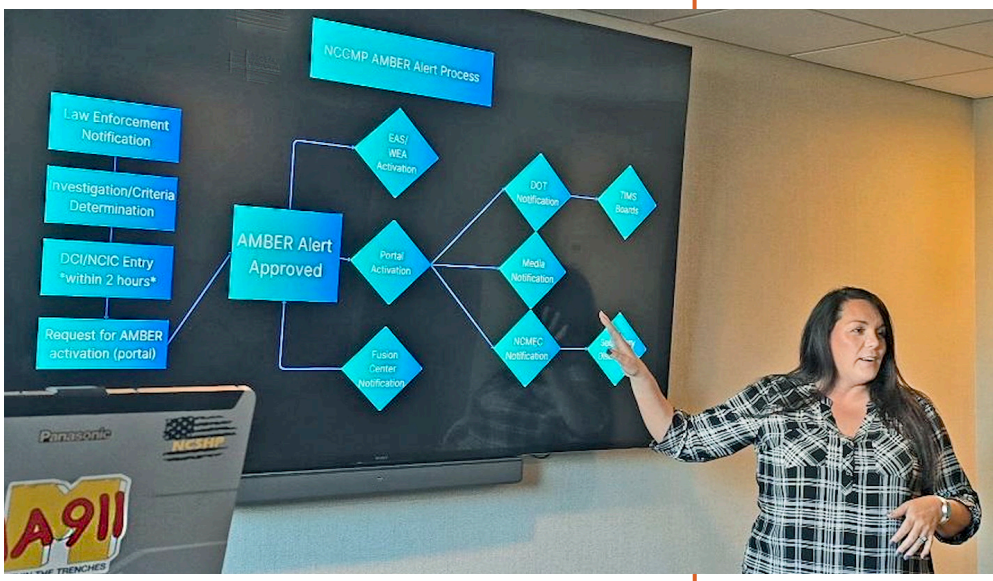
Training is everything. It's vital in our line of work. That's why I've conducted sessions at symposiums, the state's 911 Conference, local law enforcement agencies, communication centers, and more. Doing so gets important information out to those who need it the most. I go over the basic criteria for issuing an AMBER Alert and give them an overview of the process. Beyond discussing the essentials, getting out and meeting people gives me the chance to say, "Here's my cell phone number. Even if you think a case doesn't meet our AMBER Alert criteria, let's talk about it."

After transitioning from 911 to ACC did you experience any challenges?

Understanding the technical side of IPAWS [Integrated Public Alert & Warning System] was an initial hurdle. Luckily, one of the on-call team members is a guru and has helped me learn more about it. In my previous role, we would only do the EAS [Emergency Alert System]—and we were done. I've now realized that it's so much deeper than that. I'm still learning it all.

What's new with NCCMP in terms of projects you're working on?

One project is that we're in the building phase of a missing child repository. It will update weekly from the NCIC [National Crime Information Center] files, but it also gives me the option of real-time manual entry. If a missing child doesn't meet AMBER Alert criteria, I can put the word out and it will send a media notification. It



Morrissa Ahl-Moyer uses a flow chart during a training session to show the steps in activating an AMBER Alert. "I tell them the part on the left is what they need to worry about, and I handle everything else," she says.

A training test page is available on the NCCMP website. An agency can "fake enter" an AMBER Alert without actually activating it as a way to become familiar with the intake process.

will increase awareness when every minute matters. It's a first for our state, and I'm excited about it.

What issues regarding missing children concern you the most?

Human trafficking is a major problem. I really was blinded to it before coming into this role. It's scary to see how easy it can be to end up in trouble, especially when there are so many at-risk young people across the nation. Online enticement is another growing concern. I'm also seeing that 15-year-old minority females are reported missing more than any other demographic, which needs more of our research and understanding.



Training

Calling all 911 telecommunicators

AATTAP's course, 911 Telecommunicators and Missing & Abducted Children (or "911 T-MAC," for short) is essential not only for law enforcement and public safety telecommunicators but also for any members of law enforcement and support staff who address public calls for help.

The interactive training session equips 911 telecommunicators with needed skills and resources by:

- Analyzing real cases to recognize various types of missing child incidents and how they are reported.
- Exploring optimal practices using systems and standards from the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) and the Association of Public-Safety Communications Officials (APCO ANS 1.101.4-2022).
- Addressing resilience-building strategies to cope with emotionally demanding cases.

The course represents a full update of AATTAP's "Telecommunications Best Practices for Missing and Abducted Children" (TELMAC) class, which launched in 2010 as both a classroom offering and as a self-paced online class.

The 911 T-MAC class launched this past fall in Appleton, Wisconsin, where more than 60 telecommunicators from around the country attended the pilot training session.

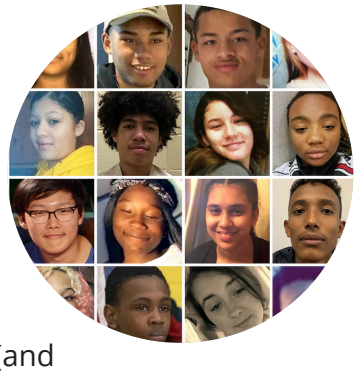
"The amount of information presented during the class was perfect," one participant said. "It was all presented in a way that wasn't overwhelming, but engaging and easy to understand."

The class will be offered in person and online starting this spring. Watch for training opportunities at bit.ly/911tmac.

NEWS BRIEFS

UNITED STATES

Nearly 50 missing youth located in New York



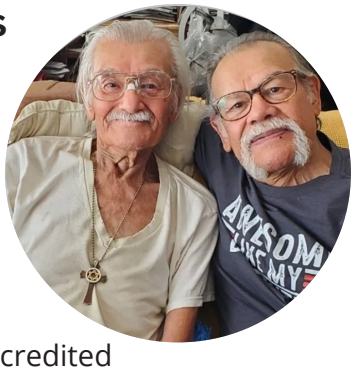
Forty-seven missing and endangered children were reunited with their families in a first-of-its-kind **rescue** operation in New York. More than 55 experts, including 22 law enforcement agencies, collaborated in the mission to locate missing Erie County children who had been taken by non-custodial parents or had run away. "I have 30 years of doing this, and this has been the proudest, most impactful moment of my career," said Kevin Branzetti, co-founder and CEO of the National Child Protection **Task Force**. Branzetti and Cindy Neff, manager of New York's Missing Persons Clearinghouse (and AATTAP/NCJTC Associate), spearheaded the initiative in which law enforcement provided investigative support to Amherst and Buffalo police departments. Investigators gained valuable knowledge and now have "more tools in our toolbox" to tackle future cases of missing children, Branzetti said.

Maryland enacts Kids Code for online privacy



As a growing number of **states** continue to grapple with tech companies on legislation meant to safeguard children online, Maryland made its Kids Code official by enacting it into law. The **Maryland Kids Code** prevents tech companies from harvesting data, posting location information, or using dark algorithms pertaining to children. A second part, slated to take effect in 2025, requires the companies to assess and analyze their products for potential harm it could cause children. The measure was contentious throughout the legislative process, with Big Tech lobbyists opposing it; **legal** challenges could still arise. The legislation **mirrors** California's 2022 Age Appropriate Design Code Act, which follows a model established in the United Kingdom.

Abducted boy reunites with family after 73 years



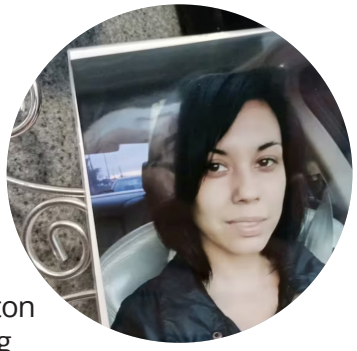
In 1951, Luis Armando Albino was playing in a California park with his older brother when a woman lured him away with the promise to buy him candy. Instead, she **abducted** the 6-year-old boy. Seventy-three years later, Albino was found alive on the East Coast, thanks to the tenacity of his niece, the help of an online ancestry test and old newspaper articles, and assistance from multiple law enforcement agencies. After DNA confirmation, the elderly Albino returned to California where he was able to hug his brother and meet relatives he never knew. Aleda Alequin, the niece credited with unraveling the mystery, hopes the story gives hope to other families with missing children. "I would say, 'Don't give up,'" Alequin says. The FBI is still pursuing the **investigation** into the abduction.

Alaska steps up efforts to strengthen case review and cultural training for investigators



Alaska is ushering in the new year with an increased focus on the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Persons (MMIP) crisis. New **legislation** signed by Governor Mike Dunleavy requires Indigenous cultural training for new police officers, an assessment of the Department of Public Safety's investigative resources for reporting MMIP cases, and the establishment of a commission to review and report on unsolved cases. Deilah Johnson, an advocate with the Village of Solomon Tribe, calls the commission a much-needed step. "At the state level, there was just not a lot of discussion or acknowledgment in addressing any of the overwhelming statistics surrounding the issues facing Indigenous populations, specifically women and young girls," Johnson said. The nine-member commission, which includes seats for victim advocacy and Alaska Native Tribal organizations, will report findings to the Alaska Legislature. Johnson hopes the new measures will continue to generate awareness about **MMIP** and inspire partnerships to build additional resources.

Washington's first-in-the-nation Missing Indigenous Persons alert deemed a success



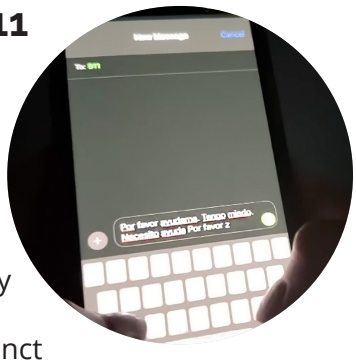
More than two years ago, Washington became the first state to implement alerts for missing Indigenous people. Today, law enforcement officials say the alerts—enacted in response to statistics showing that Indigenous persons go missing at a higher rate than other groups—have **proved** crucial in locating missing teens, many of whom can become victims of trafficking. Carri Gordon of the Washington State Patrol says the presence of the alerts has been effective in getting runaway youth to make contact with law enforcement. The alerts are also credited with improving coordination between Tribal and non-Tribal authorities which supports swifter location of missing persons. Gordon notes that MMIP alerts have helped solve longer-term cases (including that of Puyallup Tribal member **Besse Handy**, shown above).

Study: Nebraska seeing significant rise in number of missing Indigenous people



Reported cases of missing Indigenous people in Nebraska have nearly **doubled**—from 23 in 2020 to 43 in 2024. Those figures come roughly five years after the Nebraska State Patrol (NSP) was tasked with studying and producing recommendations to curb the disproportionate rate at which Indigenous children and women go missing. Officials believe the increased number of missing Indigenous people reveals a more accurate picture of the crisis, one stemming from NSP efforts to include race in missing persons reports. Although critics question why the agency's landmark study—on which other states have modeled theirs—has seen few recommended actions implemented, others say change is happening. "Progress is not as fast as I would always like it to be, but I do believe we are making progress," said Judi gaiashkibos (shown above), a citizen of the Ponca Tribe and director of the Nebraska Commission on Indian Affairs, which worked with the NSP on the report.

Trafficked Mexican teen rescued after texting 911



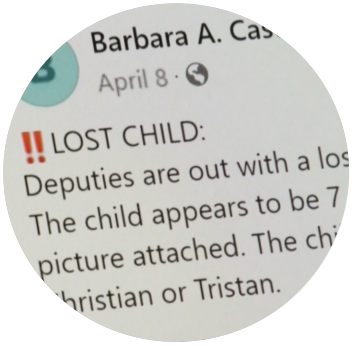
A teenage girl abducted and trafficked from Mexico was safely recovered after sending a series of text messages in Spanish to a **911** telecommunicator in California. About 20 minutes after her pleas for help came in, Ventura County Sheriff's Office deputies safely recovered the frightened girl, who was believed to be no older than 17. The case highlights the effectiveness of allowing text messages to a call center and using integrated translation technology to bridge language barriers. "Young people text—that's how they communicate," a Sheriff's Office spokesperson said. "So her first instinct is to text. Well, she texted 911 and ... that works." The girl, who had no idea where she was when she was able to quietly gain access to a cell phone in the early morning hours, identified landmarks that led deputies to her. A subsequent investigation revealed she had been trafficked from Mexico two months earlier. She provided information that led to the arrest of a 31-year-old man from Veracruz, Mexico, for human trafficking and luring, among other charges.

Lost in Europe investigation wins award



The European Parliament has lauded a project that revealed a startling number of missing migrant children in Europe. The **Lost in Europe** project investigated the disappearance of more than 50,000 child migrants and found that, on average, nearly 47 migrant children arriving in Europe have gone missing every day since 2021. The investigation concluded that many of the missing children are victims of human trafficking; based on documentation inconsistencies, the actual number may be even higher. The findings are "just the tip of the iceberg," said Aagje Leven, secretary general of Missing Children Europe. The three-month-long joint investigation by media outlets throughout seven countries received the E.U. Parliament's 2024 Daphne Caruana Galizia Prize for Journalism, named in memory of the assassinated journalist and anti-corruption activist.

Fake missing child posts circulate in Canada



Law enforcement authorities across Canada continue to raise concerns about fake missing children posts that are actually bait-and-switch **scams**. The posts, circulating on Facebook, tug at heartstrings by claiming a child is missing or has been found and needs help locating their family. After a post has been widely shared, scammers change it to promote their products or marketing schemes—sometimes with a link that, if clicked, allows access to the user's computer or initiates a ransomware attack. The problem complicates legitimate Facebook posts about missing children. "That's where this becomes insidious—because then people become nervous about sharing these things because they wonder if it's real or not," said David Gerhard, head of computer science at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg. Scam posts are often shared in public Facebook groups and have the comments turned off. Legitimate missing person posts should be verifiable by **police**, have a case report number, or be posted directly by a trusted organization or person, Gerhard said.

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