

**TESTIMONY OF**

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**for the**

**UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND THE WORKFORCE**

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON HEALTHY FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES**

***"Runaway, Homeless and Missing Children:***

***Helping the Nation's Vulnerable Youth"***

**July 24, 2007**

Madame Chairwoman and members of the Subcommittee, as President of the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC), I welcome the opportunity to appear before you to discuss issues affecting our nation's children. NCMEC joins you in your concern for the safety of the most vulnerable members of our society and thanks you for bringing attention to the problems facing America's families and communities.

Let me first provide you with some background information. NCMEC is a not-for-profit corporation, mandated by Congress and working in partnership with the U.S. Department of Justice as the national resource center and clearinghouse on missing and exploited children. NCMEC is a true public-private partnership, funded in part by Congress and in part by the private sector. Our federal funding supports specific operational functions mandated by Congress, including a national 24-hour toll-free hotline; a distribution system for missing-child photos; a system of case management and technical assistance to law enforcement and families; training programs for federal, state and local law enforcement; and programs designed to help stop the sexual exploitation of children.

In recent years, our nation has become outraged by the abductions of children like Jessica Lunsford, Jetseta Gage, Erica Pratt, Shasta Groene, Samantha Runnion, Elizabeth Smart, and many others. Their stories have unleashed fear among parents everywhere who are asking, "How safe is my child?"

The response is, "Safer than ever before."

More missing children are coming home safely today than at any time in our history. Law enforcement is responding more swiftly and effectively. There is a national network in place. Parents are more alert, more aware, and talking to their children about their safety.

Yet that is not enough, and there are some inescapable facts. Hundreds of children still do not make it home each year, and many more continue to be victimized by acts of violence. In fact children are the most victimized segment of our society.<sup>1</sup> Further, research has consistently shown that crimes committed against children of all ages are the most underreported of any victim category.<sup>2</sup>

How has NCMEC responded to this?

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<sup>1</sup> *Children as Victims: 1999 National Report Series*. Washington, D.C.: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice, May 2000, page 6.

<sup>2</sup> David Finkelhor and Richard Ormrod. *Reporting Crimes Against Juveniles*. Washington, D.C.: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice, November 1999, page 3.

We have worked with law enforcement on more than 133,000 missing-child cases, and played a role in reuniting more than 115,000 children with their families. We have a 96.2 % recovery rate, up from 62% in 1990. We have analyzed more than 500,000 reports of crimes against children on the Internet, and referred them to law enforcement, resulting in hundreds of arrests and successful prosecutions.

Here are some of the services we provide:

- **Hotline:** Since 1984 our 24-hour, national and international toll-free hotline has received more than 2 million calls, or, on average, nearly 300 calls per day, intaking new cases and receiving leads on current cases, which are triaged according to urgency of the information and the case, and referred to the investigating law enforcement agency. Information from callers about runaway children is immediately transmitted to the National Runaway Switchboard.
- **Case Management:** NCMEC Case Managers serve as the single point of contact for the searching family and provide technical assistance to locate abductors and recover missing children.
- **Case Analysis and Support:** Using NCMEC databases, external sources, and geographic databases, our analysts track leads, identify patterns among cases, and help coordinate investigations by linking cases together. In 2006 NCMEC created the Attempted Abduction Program to analyze attempted abduction trends and patterns and collect information to assist law enforcement during investigations. Currently, no other national organization aggressively tracks attempted abductions across the United States.
- **Forensic Imaging:** NCMEC provides age-progressed photographs of missing children and reconstructed facial images of unidentified, deceased children. Since 1990 NCMEC has age-progressed the photographs of almost 3,300 children; these new photos played a role in helping to identify and recover 768 children. Of the 117 facial reconstructions performed by NCMEC forensic artists for law enforcement, 29 children have been identified.
- **Cold Case Team:** NCMEC works with families, law enforcement, and medical examiners to resolve long-term missing children cases, cases of unidentified human remains of victims believed to be children and young adults, and “cold” child homicide cases. Former homicide detectives review each case, develop a set of recommendations regarding the investigation, and, if requested, provide forensic resources. NCMEC is currently handling 468 cases of long-term missing children, 201 cases of unidentified human remains, and 7 “cold” child homicide cases.

- **Photo Distribution:** NCMEC is actively distributing photos of missing children via a wide array of resources, including franked envelopes of members of Congress. Three hundred and fifty public and private sector companies and organizations partner with us to distribute photos, at no cost to NCMEC or taxpayers.
  
- **Team Adam:** Created in 2003, Team Adam is a rapid, on-site response and support system that provides no-cost investigative and technical assistance to local law enforcement. It consists of 62 retired federal, state and local investigators experienced in crimes-against-children investigations. NCMEC has deployed Team Adam 296 times in 43 states, which has helped to resolve 321 cases of missing children.
  
- **AMBER Alerts:** NCMEC offers technical assistance and training, in concert with the U.S. Department of Justice, to all state AMBER Alert programs. We also disseminate AMBER Alert messages to secondary communications distributors, such as cell phone service providers.
  
- **Website:** In 1997 we launched our website, [www.missingkids.com](http://www.missingkids.com). The use of the web has enabled us to transmit images and information regarding missing children instantly across America and around the world. The response has been overwhelming. On the first day of operation, our website received 3,000 "hits." Today, we receive more than 1 million "hits" every day, and are linked with hundreds of other sites to provide real-time images of breaking cases of missing children. To demonstrate the value of this in a real-world sense, a police officer in Puerto Rico searched our website, identified a possible match, and then worked with one of our case managers to identify and recover a child who had been abducted as an infant from her home seven years earlier.
  
- **Publications:** NCMEC has designed, written, edited and published many collaterals and publications for law enforcement, other child-serving professionals, and the general public. Since 1984, NCMEC has published more than 42 million copies of its publications.
  
- **Training:** Each month, in our Jimmy Ryce Law Enforcement Training Center, NCMEC brings in police chiefs and sheriffs for training in the policy and practical aspects of missing and exploited child investigations. In addition, we are also training state and federal prosecutors, police unit commanders, and many others. We also conduct on-site training sessions for hospital staff in preventing infant abductions.

• **International Cases:** NCMEC plays a key role in international child abduction cases, handling all cases of children abducted out of the United States, as well as acting as the State Department’s representative on incoming cases under the Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction. Since September 1995, we have handled 8,264 international child abduction cases, resulting in the resolution of 4,714 cases. We are using the Internet to build a network to distribute images worldwide in partnership with Interpol. We also provide attorney referrals and other assistance to American parents whose children were abducted to another country.

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While NCMEC’s initial mandate was missing children’s issues, NCMEC has also been a leader in the fight against child sexual exploitation. As technology has evolved and provided those who sexually exploit children with more sophisticated and insidious tools to prey on their vulnerability, the challenges of protecting our children have increased in complexity and number. The mission and resources of NCMEC have responded to this challenge in the following ways:

• **Exploited Child Division:** In 1997, in response to the increasing prevalence of child sexual victimization, NCMEC officially opened our Exploited Child Division (ECD). ECD is responsible for the receipt, processing, initial analysis and referral to law enforcement of information about these crimes. As technology continued to advance and the use of computers became more widespread, Congress recognized the need to provide the public with a central reporting mechanism for crimes against children on the Internet – and came to us.

• **CyberTipline:** In response to Congress’ request, NCMEC launched the CyberTipline, [www.cybertipline.com](http://www.cybertipline.com), in 1998. The CyberTipline serves as the national online clearinghouse for investigative leads and tips and is operated in partnership with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (“FBI”), the Department of Homeland Security’s Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (“ICE”), the U.S. Postal Inspection Service, the U.S. Secret Service, the U.S. Department of Justice’s Child Exploitation and Obscenity Section and the Internet Crimes Against Children Task Forces, as well as state and local law enforcement. Leads are received in seven categories of crimes:

- possession, manufacture and distribution of child pornography;
- online enticement of children for sexual acts;
- child prostitution;
- child-sex tourism;

- child sexual molestation (not in the family);
- unsolicited obscene material sent to a child; and
- misleading domain names.

These leads are reviewed by NCMEC analysts, who visit the reported sites, examine and evaluate the content, use search tools to try to identify perpetrators, and provide all lead information to the appropriate law enforcement agency. The FBI, ICE and Postal Inspection Service have “real time” access to the leads, and all three agencies assign agents and analysts to work directly out of NCMEC and review the reports. The results: in the 9 years since the CyberTipline began operation, NCMEC has received and processed more than 500,000 leads, resulting in hundreds of arrests and successful prosecutions.

• **CyberTipline for Internet Service Providers:** In 1998, Congress passed the Protection of Children from Sexual Predators Act,<sup>3</sup> which requires that providers of electronic communication services report apparent child pornography on their systems to NCMEC. To facilitate this new role, NCMEC created a separate reporting mechanism through which these providers can swiftly and efficiently transmit the images and related information to NCMEC for analysis and referral to law enforcement. In response to this congressional mandate, NCMEC handles approximately 500 reports per week.

• **Child Victim Identification Program (CVIP):** CVIP was formally created in 2002 in response to the Supreme Court’s decision that federal laws prohibiting child pornography only apply to images of real children and not to images that simply appear to be children.<sup>4</sup> CVIP analysts assist law enforcement and prosecutors by maintaining a catalog of information about identified child victims, which can be used to provide the evidence required to get a conviction in court. The program also serves to assist law enforcement in rescuing children who are currently being abused but whose identity and location are unknown. To date, CVIP has processed more than eight million images and movies, and has cataloged information about more than one thousand child victims who have been identified by law enforcement agencies around the world.

Here is but one example of CVIP’s success: our analysts received images of several young girls whom they did not recognize from previous images. The photos were taken in various rooms in a home. By scrutinizing the background in each image, our analysts detected clues to the location of the girls: an ad for a local convenience store, an envelope with the name of a storage facility, and a Girl Scout

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<sup>3</sup> P.L. 105-314.

<sup>4</sup> *Ashcroft v. Free Speech Coalition*, 535 U.S. 234 (2002).

uniform. A team of federal, state and local law enforcement used this information to find the girls and arrest their abuser. He was the grandfather of two of the girls as well as their legal guardian. He was convicted and given a sentence of 750 years in prison. None of the girls had told anyone about what he had done to them. Their abuse would be continuing today if no one had tried to find them.

- **Partnerships with Internet Industry:** Last year, six Internet industry leaders, AOL, Yahoo, Google, Microsoft, Earthlink and United Online, created a Technology Coalition to work with NCMEC to develop and deploy technology solutions that disrupt the ability of predators to use the Internet to exploit children or traffic in child pornography. The Technology Coalition brings together the collective experience, knowledge and expertise of its members and represents a significant step towards making the world safer for our children.

- **NetSmartz411:** This is a first-of-its-kind, online service operated by NCMEC to answer questions about Internet safety, computers and the web. It is provided at no cost to the public, in partnership with the Qwest Foundation. Concerned parents, children, or anyone, can directly access the NetSmartz411 library to search for information as well as contact NCMEC experts to ask questions related to online safety and the Internet.

- **Safety Education Campaigns:** NCMEC has partnered with federal agencies, industry leaders and public service organizations to create campaigns to educate parents and children about Internet safety. These safety messages include “Help Delete Online Predators,” “Don’t Believe the Type,” “Type Smart. Post Wisely” and “Think Before You Post.”

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In recent years, Congress has asked NCMEC to undertake a number of new challenges and responsibilities beyond its core functions. We have welcomed them and believe that NCMEC is well suited to take on these tasks. Further, we consider these initiatives to be an integral part of our mandate as the national resource center and clearinghouse on missing and exploited children. These new challenges include the following:

- **LOCATER:** Congress asked NCMEC to develop and implement a program to enhance basic law enforcement technology in responding to missing child cases. NCMEC created LOCATER, a web-based program which enables police to create high-quality color posters for local distribution when a

child disappears as well as disseminate that information online to other law enforcement agencies, the media and other outlets. NCMEC has approximately 4,000 active LOCATER users.

- **NetSmartz Internet Safety Resource:** When Boys & Girls Clubs of America launched its effort to create technology centers in all of its clubs, Congress asked that NCMEC develop a state-of-the-art Internet safety resource to ensure that these centers could be used safely by children. Thus, NetSmartz was born – an interactive, educational safety resource for children, parents, educators and law enforcement that uses age-appropriate, 3-dimensional activities to teach children how to stay safer on the Internet. NetSmartz is now available at no cost to other youth organizations, schools, and the general public at [www.netsmartz.org](http://www.netsmartz.org). Since its inception, 16 state Attorneys General have recommended the use of NetSmartz in their public schools; currently, all 50 states have schools that use NetSmartz.

- **Background Checks for Non-Profit Child-Serving Organizations:** In response to Congress' request in 2003<sup>5</sup>, NCMEC launched a pilot program to conduct national criminal history background checks on applicants for volunteer positions with non-profit organizations that provide services to children. Because it is a fact that child molesters will seek legitimate access to children, these organizations are particularly attractive to predators. To date, our Background Check Unit (BCU) has conducted over 33,000 fitness determinations based on criminal histories. A startling number of applicants were found to have lied about not having criminal histories, which included violent crimes and crimes against children. This project has demonstrated not only the need for fingerprint-based checks of the national criminal history database, as opposed to name-based checks of state databases, but also the need to make these comprehensive checks available at the lowest possible cost to ensure that these organizations are able to provide the best protection to the children they serve.

- **Hurricanes Katrina and Rita/National Emergency Child Locator Center:** The Department of Justice asked NCMEC to lead federal and local efforts to recover the more than 5,000 children displaced during Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005. Team Adam consultants were deployed to the affected areas to serve as an on-site rapid response and support system, providing investigative and technical assistance to local law enforcement. Team Adam consultants also set up safe areas for missing children in the evacuee shelters and, working directly from these shelters, electronically transmitted information and photos of the children directly to NCMEC headquarters. To manage the volume of Katrina/Rita-related calls, NCMEC created a dedicated Katrina/Rita Missing Person Hotline

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<sup>5</sup> The Prosecutorial Remedies and Other Tools to end the Exploitation of Children Today (PROTECT) Act, P.L. 108-21.



which we operated in addition to our existing Call Center Hotline. In the aftermath of the hurricanes, NCMEC handled more than 34,000 Katrina/Rita-related calls. NCMEC's relationship with the media proved vital to our efforts – because of the ongoing television coverage of NCMEC's Katrina/Rita Operation, millions of people saw the photos of displaced children and got information that led to their reunification. As a result of NCMEC's expertise and ability to rapidly mobilize critical resources, all (100%) of the more than 5,000 missing/displaced children cases reported to NCMEC in the aftermath of the storms were resolved within 6 months.

In 2006, Congress passed legislation to create the National Emergency Child Locator Center at NCMEC<sup>6</sup> to similarly handle all future such disasters. We have developed a Disaster Response Plan and are actively working with the Department of Homeland Security, the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the American Red Cross to establish policies and procedures necessary for the Center's operation.

- **The Financial Coalition Against Child Pornography:** At the request of Senator Richard Shelby, NCMEC brought together leading banks, credit card companies, third party payment companies and Internet service companies, in a joint effort to eradicate the multi-billion-dollar commercial child pornography industry from the Internet.

- **Sex Offender Tracking Team:** At the request of the U.S. Marshals Service, under its mandate per the Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act<sup>7</sup>, NCMEC created the Sex Offender Tracking Team (SOTT) to serve as the central information and analysis hub to help locate non-compliant registered sex offenders. Analysts provide information upon request to federal, state and local law enforcement agencies. In addition, SOTT analysts compare NCMEC's attempted abduction data, online predator data, and child abduction data to identify potential linkages with non-compliant sex offenders being sought by law enforcement. This information will be used to create more effective prevention and response strategies regarding these offenders.

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<sup>6</sup> Defense Appropriations Bill, P.L. 109-295.

<sup>7</sup> P.L. 109-248.

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The legacy of missing and exploited children in the United States can be seen in new laws, heightened public awareness, improved response from law enforcement, and unprecedented national attention to prevention and education. The recent resurgence of awareness of this ongoing problem is a call to action to all law- and policymakers across the country. Enormous progress has been made to better protect our nation's children in the past 20 years, but our children deserve even more.

Since 1984, per your mandate and with your support, NCMEC has been proud to serve as America's national resource center and clearinghouse for missing and exploited children.

Madame Chairwoman, we are deeply grateful for the Subcommittee's leadership and support, and, as always, stand ready to work with you and your committee to bring more missing children home and keep every child safe.