



# Special Report: Examining Missingness among Children in Out-of-Home Care Placements in Nebraska

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## Explanation of UNO-FCRO Collaboration

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In 2019, Nebraska Legislative Bill (LB) 154 mandated that the Nebraska State Patrol, in collaboration with the Nebraska Commission on Indian Affairs, “conduct a study on the scope of missing Native American women and children in Nebraska.” University of Nebraska Omaha School of Criminology and Criminal Justice Faculty members, Drs. Tara Richards and Emily Wright, along with doctoral student research assistant, Alyssa Nystrom served as the research collaborators on the LB-154 study (see Sutter et al., 2020).

The LB-154 study included 4 point-in-time counts of all reported missing persons in the state of Nebraska (i.e., reported to Nebraska’s Missing Persons List, National Missing and Unidentified Persons System, and/or the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children). Results indicated that at each of the time points about **two-thirds of Nebraska’s reported missing persons were minors** (i.e., ages 18 years or younger) (Sutter et al., 2020).

After completion of the LB-154 study, Dr. Richards and Ms. Nystrom approached Foster Care Review Office (FCRO) Executive Director, Monika Gross, about the disproportionate representation of minors among Nebraska’s missing persons and the potential of a UNO-FCRO collaboration to develop a special report on missingness specifically among Nebraska’s children in out-of-home care placements across child welfare and youth justice systems. After seeking input from FCRO Research Director, Heather Wood, and Senior Research Analyst, Linda Cox, Director Gross approved the collaboration. The following report presents the special report developed from this collaboration.

## Executive Summary

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The present study examined the prevalence and context of *missingness* (i.e., the child has been reported as a missing person) among children in out-of-home care placements in Nebraska. Data comprised of (1) officially reported missing minors (i.e., 18 years and younger) from a point-in-time count of missing persons in Nebraska on 1/20/20 and (2) administrative records from Foster Care Review Office (FCRO) for children described as in an out-of-home placement or having just been in an out-of-home placement and nearing permanency completion on 1/20/20.

The following research questions guided the analysis:

1. Among children who had been officially reported missing, what was the prevalence and contexts of children who were in out-of-home care placements compared to children who were not in out-of-home care placements?
2. Among children who were in out-of-home care placements, who had been officially reported as a missing person (i.e., what individual- and case-level factors predict missingness among children in out-of-home care)?
3. What are the case contexts of children in out-of-home care placements who are officially reported as a missing person?

First, results showed that 30% of Nebraska’s officially reported missing children were missing from out-of-home care placements. There were no age or sex differences for children who were missing from out-of-home care placements compared to children who were missing from their families of origin. Black and Native American children were disproportionately represented among children who were missing from out-of-home care placements.

Further analysis identified that 3% of children in out-of-home care placements were officially reported as a missing person. Children in out-of-home care who were reported as missing were significantly older than children in out-of-home care who were not reported as missing. In addition, children who were missing from out-of-home care were disproportionately Black and Native American. Findings also showed that placement instability – more times in out-of-home care, more out-of-home care placements, and shorter stays in the most recent out-of-home placement – was associated with missingness as was being under Probation supervision. In comparison, relative or kinship foster care was “protective” against missingness; however, 18% of children missing from out-of-home care placements were missing as they were nearing permanency.

Qualitative analysis of case reviews for approximately half of children in out-of-home care placement who were reported as missing showed high rates of untreated substance use and mental health challenges. Episodes of violence and victimization including suspected and documented sex trafficking were also identified. In addition, the impacts of placement instability – in particular poor bonds to school – were highlighted. Taken together, the study suggests that increased support for high-need children in out-of-home care and training for their caregivers is needed. Future research and policy priorities must focus on ways to identify and intervene in the lives of children in out-of-home placements before they go missing from care.

## Background

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Every state in the U.S. has a child welfare system that is tasked with receiving and investigating reports of child abuse and neglect (i.e., child maltreatment), and in cases where reports of child maltreatment are substantiated, removing children from their homes, and placing them in alternative care settings (Children's Bureau, 2020a). Alternative care settings, commonly known as *foster care* might include placement in a relative's home, a non-relative's home (i.e., with trained foster parents), or in a group home or institution (Children's Bureau, 2020a). In most cases, foster care placements are intended to be short-term sources of care (Children's Bureau, 2020a). In more than half of cases, families are offered supportive services with the goal of family reunification (Children's Bureau, 2021).

Most children placed into foster care are removed from their homes due to abuse or neglect, in other cases, parents have abandoned their child(ren) or were unable to care for them due to incarceration or death (Children's Bureau, 2020b). Relatedly, children in foster care are disproportionately more likely to have substance abuse or mental health problems than children in the general population (Gambon et al., 2020); at least one third have a disability (Lee et al., 2018). As a result, children in foster care often require physical and behavioral health services such as therapy and intervention programs. For example, children in foster care may benefit from interventions that address prior trauma and encourage feelings of self-empowerment and self-determination, which Lee et al. (2018) found impacts overall quality of life in a positive way. Decisions regarding children's service needs, foster care placement(s), and plans for family reunification are overseen by a case manager (Children's Bureau, 2020a).

In 2019, there were approximately 420,000 children in foster care (Children's Bureau, 2021). Of these children, the average age was 8.4 years old with a median age of 7.7 years old. Boys are slightly more likely (52%) to be placed into foster care than are girls (Children's Bureau, 2021). Children in foster care are predominantly White (Children's Bureau, 2021) as are most U.S. children; however, research suggests that minority children are disproportionately represented in foster care. Prior studies have found that processes for reporting, investigating, and substantiating claims of maltreatment, as well as removal processes, have contributed to racial disparities in the foster care system (Kahn & Hansen, 2017; Putnam-Hornstein et al., 2013; Wulczyn & Lery, 2007; Nesmith, 2006). Emerging research also shows that children who identify as LGBTQ+ are overrepresented in foster care (Gambon et al., 2020).

### Who Runs from Out-of-Home Care Placements

Prior research has provided inconclusive estimates regarding the prevalence of running away among children in foster care with rates ranging from 3% (Thompson et al., 2000) to 71% (Biehal & Wade, 1999) across different samples and jurisdictions. Studies have identified a range of individual risk factors thought to increase the likelihood a child will run away from placement, including age, gender, race, substance use, and mental health history, among others. Regarding age, studies suggest that teenagers (those age 13 and older) are more likely to run from care than those who are younger (Courtney et al., 2005, Courtney & Zinn, 2009; Dworsky et al., 2018). In addition, research suggests that children who are removed from their home at an older age are more likely to run than those who are younger at first removal. For example, Lin (2012) found that children who run from placement are on average 5 years older at their first removal than those who do not run.

Females are significantly more likely to run than males (English & English, 1999; Fasulo et al., 2002; Kim et al., 2013; Sunseri, 2003; Dworsky et al., 2018). Studies have also shown that children of color are more likely to run from their placements; however, studies have been inconsistent regarding whether children from a particular racial or ethnic group are more likely to run away. For example, Wulczyn (2020) found that African American and Hispanic children are more likely to run from placement than their White peers. Similarly, Lin (2012) found that African American girls are most likely to run. In contrast, Nesmith (2006) found that

American Indian children had twice the odds of running away as White children and that race was not a statistically significant predictor of running for any other racial group. Finally, Fasulo et al. (2002) found that the impact of race/ethnicity was too ambiguous to be meaningful; however, their study was relatively small ( $n = 147$ ) and focused on children who ran from specialized foster care (i.e., care that is trauma informed and utilizes psychotherapy and other mental and physical health services).

Prior studies have also suggested that children with substance use disorders are more likely to run away from care than those without substance use disorders (Courtney et al., 2005). Likewise, mental health diagnoses have been associated with running away from foster care (Courtney et al., 2005; Courtney & Zinn, 2009; Clark et al., 2008; Kim et al., 2015). Further, Lin (2012) found that foster children who ran away from their placements had higher rates of disabilities (including mental health disabilities) than foster children who did not run away.

In addition to individual-level risks, several placement-level factors associated with running away from a foster care placement have been identified. For example, children in group placements are more likely to run away from care than those in family placements (Courtney et al., 2005; Witherup et al., 2008); as are children placed with a non-relative as compared to those placed with a relative (Courtney et al., 2005). Placement instability has also been linked to running away: children with 2 placements or fewer are less likely to run from care compared to children with more than 2 placements (Children's Bureau, 2018); higher numbers of separations from home are also related to an increased likelihood of running from placement (Clark et al., 2008; Courtney et al., 2005). Finally, case plan goal may be connected to running from a foster care placement. Kim et al. (2015) found that children whose long-term care plans included foster care and/or whose case plan goal was not reunification were more likely to run than those with plans for shorter stays in foster care, family reunification, or adoption.

### Why Children Run from Out-of-Home Care Placements

There are myriad reasons a child might run from a foster care placement, and studies tend to agree that running is a coping behavior for children in care (Lin, 2012). Collectively, scholars note that children run away because they are either *running to* or *running from* someone or something (Crosland et al., 2018; Crosland & Dunlap, 2014; Courtney et al., 2005). For example, Courtney et al. (2005) examined administrative data for over 14,000 children who ran from care over the course of 10 years between 1993 and 2003 and interviewed 42 children who had run away from foster care and then returned. Running behavior was organized into four broad categories: (1) running to family of origin, (2) returning to friends and the streets, (3) touching base and maintaining relationships, and (4) running at random.

Similarly, a review by Crosland et al. (2018) classified the reasons children reported running from their foster placements using this dichotomy; though they used the terms *access* (i.e., running to) and *avoidance* (i.e., running from). They found that children ran to positive social supports such as family and friends and ran from negative social interactions, such as those with foster care placement staff and peers that left them feeling unloved or unvalued. The desire for “normalcy” was another key reason children ran. In interviews, children reported running to friends, parties, and extracurricular activities that made them feel normal (i.e., activities that a child not in out-of-home care would experience).

Crosland and colleagues also identified that children ran from situations they perceived as preventing them from participating in activities they felt were normal such as dating, not being able to eat the foods they liked, or other rules they felt prevented them from making decisions. Children also cited running from placements due to boredom. Boredom was not a common reason children cited for running; however, children did indicate they sometimes ran to avoid (*run from*) the perceived monotony of life in care where they were no longer able to do many of the things they did prior to being placed in care. These findings are consistent with a previous body of work which found that children run to family and friends, to activities that are forbidden in the foster placement, and from caregivers or environments children perceive as negative (see Crosland &

Dunlap, 2014; Courtney et al., 2005; Fasulo, 2002; Angenet et al. 1991).

While prior research has explored the risk factors and context for running away from foster care, the present research aims to shed light on the prevalence and context of *missingness* (i.e., the child has been reported as a missing person) among children in out-of-home care placements. The problem of missing persons has gained national attention, especially regarding missing Native American and African American persons (e.g., Sutter et al., 2020); however, little is known regarding the relationship between out-of-home placement, such as foster care, and missing persons cases. In fact, the term *missing* is rarely used to describe children who are not present at their out-of-home placements. Prior research, as well as state and administrative departments and data systems, classify these children as *runaways* which seemingly places blame on the child rather than considering the potential role of the system structure and adult caretakers (Lacey, 2019). Whether classified as runaways or missing persons, prior research suggests that children who are not present at their out-of-home placement are at greater risk for violence and victimization (Gambon et al., 2020; Crosland & Dunlap, 2014). These children may be exposed to the risk of criminal or sexual victimization, drug or alcohol abuse, criminal activity, and human trafficking, among other risks (Clark et al., 2008; Lutzman et al., 2018; Bowden & Lambie, 2015; Gambon et al., 2020).

In addition to expanding this line of inquiry to focus specifically on the prevalence and context of missingness among children who had out-of-home placements in the child welfare system (e.g., foster care), the present research also includes children who had out-of-home care placements due to their delinquency status. Specifically, these children are under the supervision of Nebraska's Administrative Office of the Courts and Probation – Juvenile Services Division (hereafter referred to as Probation) and are most often placed in non-treatment congregate homes (also known as group homes) (FCRO, 2021). Children in out-of-home placements due to delinquency status have high rates of diagnosed mental health conditions and significant experiences with abuse and/or neglect and associated trauma (see FCRO, 2021). As discussed above, group home placements and mental health diagnoses are predictive of running, leaving this population particularly vulnerable to going missing. Further, in practice, if a child who is in an out-of-home placement due to delinquency status is not present at their placement, they would be considered to have *absconded from care*, which again may obscure underlying factors associated with their missingness. Taken together the present study will examine the prevalence and predictors of missingness among all children in *out-of-home care* in Nebraska. This more inclusive term is defined by the Nebraska Foster Care Review Office (FCRO) as “... 24-hour substitute care for children placed away from their parents or guardians and for whom a state agency has placement and care responsibility” (FCRO, 2021, p. 4). This term includes out-of-home placements due to child abuse or neglect as well as delinquency status.



## Current Study

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On January 20, 2020, a point-in-time count of missing persons in Nebraska was conducted and uncovered that two-thirds of Nebraska's reported missing persons were children (i.e., in Nebraska, minors aged 18 years or younger) (see Sutter et al., 2020; Richards et al., 2021). Using data from this point-in-time count of reported missing persons and administrative records on children's out-of-home care placements from the Nebraska Foster Care Review Office, the present research examines the relationship between missingness and out-of-home care placements among children who had been reported missing in Nebraska. Then, among children who were in out-of-home care placements, individual and case-level factors were assessed to explore predictors and contexts of missingness. The following research questions guided the analyses.

1. Among children who had been officially reported as missing, what was the prevalence and contexts of children who were in out-of-home care placements compared to children who were not in out-of-home care placements?
2. Among children who were in out-of-home care placements, who had been officially reported as a missing person (i.e., what individual- and case-level factors predict missingness among children in out-of-home care)?
3. What are the case contexts of children in out-of-home care placements who are officially reported as a missing person?

# Methodology

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## Data and Sample

Data were drawn from two distinct sources (1) a point-in-time count of missing persons officially reported in the state of Nebraska on January 20, 2020, and (2) administrative records from the Nebraska Foster Care Review Office (FCRO) for children described as in an out-of-home placement or having just been in an out-of-home care placement and nearing permanency completion on January 20, 2020. Data for the point-in-time count of officially reported missing persons was collected from three publicly available data sources: (1) the Nebraska Missing Persons List (NMPL), (2) the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs), and (3) the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children's (NCMEC) missing persons list. On the day of the point-in-time count, January 20, 2020, the NMPL database was accessed and data for all persons missing from Nebraska on that date were recorded in a SPSS database. These data were then cross-checked against the national lists from NamUs and NCMEC and any additional persons missing from Nebraska that were not reflected on the NMPL were added to the dataset. Data collection was conducted by three Ph.D. level graduate assistants (see Richards et al., 2021 for a full description of the study design and methods).

The list of names of missing children identified in the point-in-time count of officially reported missing persons was then cross-checked with the administrative records from the FCRO. The FCRO is an independent state agency responsible for the oversight of the permanency, safety, and well-being of all children in out-of-home care in Nebraska. The FCRO's role is to independently track children in out-of-home care, collect and analyze data related to these children, and make recommendations on conditions and outcomes, including any needed corrective actions. The FCRO is statutorily mandated to maintain an independent tracking system of all children in an out-of-home placement in the state. The tracking system is used to provide information about the number of children entering and leaving care as well as other data regarding children's needs and trends in out-of-home placements, including data collected as part of the FCRO review process. The first FCRO review after children's removal from the home is usually scheduled to occur at approximately six months post-removal. Children are then re-reviewed about every six months for as long as they remain in out-of-home care. The FCRO's recommendations, findings, and other review information are provided to the court and all legal parties in a formal document. Whenever possible, first reviews and re-reviews are scheduled to occur shortly before court review or permanency hearings so that information is current and relevant.

A Ph.D. level graduate student research assistant was embedded at the FCRO to serve as a data intern for this special project on missingness among children who had been in out-of-home placements in Nebraska. The data intern worked closely with FCRO staff to develop the deidentified project dataset and to clean and analyze these data. The study design was reviewed by the University of Nebraska Institutional Review Board and deemed a program evaluation, not human subject's research.

## Measures

**Officially Reported Missing Persons Data.** For each case, the *first and last name*, *age at missing*, *sex* (0 = male, 1 = female), *race* (Uniform Crime Report [UCR] racial categories: 1 = White, 2 = Black, 3 = American Indian/Alaska Native, 4 = Asian or Pacific Islander, or 5 = Unknown), and *date of missingness* was recorded. *Years missing* was calculated by subtracting the date the child went missing from the date of data collection (i.e., January 20, 2020).

**Foster Care Review Office Data.** Cases were deidentified using a unique *FCRO ID number*. For each case the following demographic data was collected, *age* was calculated by subtracting the date of birth from the date of data collection (i.e., January 20, 2020), *sex* (0 = male, 1 = female), *race* (FCRO racial categories: 1 = White, Non-Hispanic; 2 = Black, Non-Hispanic; 3 = American Indian or Alaska Native, Non-Hispanic; 4 =

Asian/Native Hawaiian, Non-Hispanic; 5 = Hispanic; 6 = Multiracial, Non-Hispanic; 7 = Other Race, Non-Hispanic; and 8 = Unknown Race) and *date of missingness*.

*Times in care (lifetime)* included the number of care episodes over the child's lifetime, *number of placements (lifetime)* included the number of placements over the child's lifetime, and *days in current placement* indicates the number of days the child had been in the placement type they were assigned on January 20, 2020. *Placement at point-in-time (PIT)* indicates the type of placement the children was assigned on January 20, 2020 (1 = foster home, relative or fictive/kinship; 2 = foster home, non-relative; 3 = group home; 4 = institution, i.e., medical hospital, psychiatric facility, etc.; 5 = supervised independent living, 6 = trial home visit; 7 = detention facility, 8 = near permanency placement, i.e., adoptive home approved/licensed. *Listed as Missing from Care in FCRO at PIT* indicates that the child had been listed as "missing from care" in the Foster Care Review Office records on January 20, 2020. *Agency involvement* comprised the state agency or agencies responsible for supervising the child's out-of-home placement as of January 20, 2020 (1 = Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services/Child and Family Services, 2 = Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services/Child and Family Services and Probation, 3 = Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services/Office of Juvenile Services and Probation, 4 = Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services/Office of Juvenile Services, and 5 = Probation Only. *Reviewed* indicated whether the child had a FCRO review within 6 months of January 20, 2020 (0 = no, 1 = yes).

Among the cases that had a FCRO review, the following additional variables were available: whether the child's *mother's parental rights were intact* and/or *father's parental rights were intact*, whether the child was *currently enrolled in school*, *regularly attends school*, *earns grades on target* in more than half of their classes, or is *involved in extracurricular activities*. Documentation or suspicion of *sex trafficking victimization* and documentation or suspicion of *labor trafficking victimization* was recorded. Case information was also available regarding whether the child had a current *disability diagnosis*, was receiving *special education services*, had a *mental health diagnosis*, was *receiving mental health services*, or *receiving substance abuse services*. Variables were coded as 0 = no, 1 = yes.

In addition, the child's *primary permanency objective* (1 = adoption, 2 = independent living, 3 = family preservation or reunification, 4 = guardianship, and 5 = pre-disposition, i.e., permanency objective had not yet been identified) was identified. Finally, the *court* associated with the child's episode of care on January 20, 2020, and for children who were on probation, the *probation district* associated with the episode of care was identified.

## Analytic Plan

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Analysis proceeded over several phases. To begin, the population of children who had been officially reported missing as of January 20, 2020 (i.e., the date of the point-in-time count of officially reported missing persons), was compared with FCRO administrative records on January 20, 2020, to identify which children were in an out-of-home care placement when they were reported missing. Data from the missing persons list was used for this analysis.

Next, the population of children who were in out-of-home care placements on January 20, 2020, was examined and children who appeared in the population of officially reported missing persons were compared to children who did not appear in the population of officially reported missing persons. Then, the subsample of children who (1) had been officially reported missing from their out-of-home placements and (2) had a review from the FCRO was compared with the subsample of children who had been officially reported missing from their out-of-home placements but had not had a review from the FCRO. For each of these analyses, FCRO data was used and descriptive statistics and means tests were estimated to identify significant differences between groups. Finally, detailed descriptive statistics for the subsample of children who had been officially reported missing from their out-of-home placements and who had a review from the FCRO were estimated and qualitative data from their case files were examined to provide insight into the circumstances of their going missing from care. Alpha was set at  $p < .05$  for all quantitative analyses.

## Results

The first research question concerned the relationship between missingness and out-of-home care among children in Nebraska. To address research question one, we identified the population of children (i.e., minors, ages 18 years or younger) who had been officially reported missing in Nebraska as of January 20, 2020, and crosschecked these missing persons records with data from the FCRO. Results indicated that nearly 30% of children who had been officially reported missing as of January 20, 2020, were in an out-of-home care placement (see Table 1). Children missing from out-of-home care placements were statistically similar to children who were missing from their families of origin regarding age and sex; however, children who were missing from out-of-home care placements were statistically different from children who were missing from their families of origin regarding race and years missing. Specifically, children who were missing from out-of-home care placements were more likely to be Black whereas children who were missing from their family of origin were more likely to be listed as an “unknown” race. In addition, children who were missing from out-of-home placements were missing for significantly less time than children who were missing from their family of origin, an average of 0.16 years compared to 0.67 years,  $t(327.355) = 4.320, p < .001$ .

**Table 1 : Descriptives for Officially Reported Missing Children on 1/20/2020 and Comparisons for Children in Out-of-Home Placements versus Children not in Out-of-Home Placements ( $N = 381$ )**

	Total Sample $N = 381$		Children in Out-of-Home Placements $n = 114$		Children Not in Out-of-Home Placements $n = 267$		$t / \chi^2$ test
	$N$	%	$n$	%	$n$	%	
<b>Race</b>							$\chi^2(4) = 12.484$ $p = .014$
White	211	55.38	56	49.12	155	58.05	
Black	107	28.08	43	37.72	64	23.97	
Asian	4	1.05	0	-	4	1.50	
American Indian/Alaska Native	30	7.87	11	9.65	19	7.12	
“Unknown race” in missing persons database(s)	29	7.61	4	3.51	25	9.36	
<b>Age at Missing</b>	$M = 15.89; SD = 1.85$ Range = 3-18 years		$M = 16.01; SD = 1.30$ Range = 12-18 years		$M = 15.84; SD = 2.04$ Range = 3-18 years		$t(322.447) = -1.045$ $p = .148$
<b>Sex</b>							$\chi^2(1) = .003$ $p = .956$
Female	183	48.00	55	48.25	128	47.94	
Male	198	52.00	59	51.75	139	52.06	
<b>Years Missing</b>	$M = .52; SD = 1.56$ Range = 0-15 years		$M = .16; SD = .43$ Range = 0-2 years		$M = .67; SD = 1.82$ Range = 0-15 years		$t(327.355) = 4.320$ $p < .001$

Research question two was concerned with the individual- and case-level factors predictive of being reported missing among children in out-of-home care. To address this research question, we examined the FCRO records for all children who were in out-of-home care placements on January 20, 2020 ( $N = 4,103$ ) and compared children who had been officially reported missing ( $n = 114$ ) with children who had not been officially reported missing ( $n = 3,989$ ) (see Table 2). Results showed no significant differences regarding sex across children who had and had not been officially reported as missing. Conversely, findings indicated that children who had been officially reported missing were significantly older on average than children who had not been officially reported missing, 16.76 years old compared to 9.98 years old,  $t(277.834) = -43.958, p < .001$ . In addition, a significantly greater percentage of children who had been officially reported missing were Black, while a significantly lower percentage of children who had been officially reported missing were White,  $\chi^2(6) = 22.730, p < .001$ . Regarding placement stability, children who had been officially reported missing had greater numbers of episodes in care during their lifetime on average (2.59 versus 1.49),  $t(115.094) = -7.022, p < .001$ , and greater numbers of placements during their lifetime on average (8.89 versus 3.96),  $t(115.564) = -6.850, p < .001$ , compared to children who had not been officially reported missing. Further, children who had been officially reported missing had been in their current placement significantly fewer days than children who had not been officially reported missing, a median of 59 days compared to 138 days,  $t(129.087) = 7.553, p < .001$ .

Placement type was further explored by examining children's (1) placement type on January 20, 2020, or among children whose placement type was "missing from care," (2) children's most recent placement type before going missing from care. Significant differences regarding placement type across children who had and had not been officially reported missing were identified,  $\chi^2(7) = 105.246, p < .001$ . Significantly greater percentages of children who were officially reported missing were in group homes, institutions, independent living placements, detention facilities, and near permanency placements, while significantly greater percentages of children who had not been officially reported missing were in relative/kinship foster home placements and trial home visits. Of note, of the 20 children who had been reported missing from a near permanency placement, all 20 had been returned home to their family of origin. For 84 children in out-of-home care placements on January 20, 2020, the current placement type in FCRO records was listed as "missing from care"; 60.71% of children with a "missing from care" placement had been officially reported missing, while 39.29% had not been officially reported missing as of January 20, 2020,  $\chi^2(1) = 1065.593, p < .001$ . Finally, there were significant differences regarding the types of agency supervision among children who had and had not been officially reported missing,  $\chi^2(5) = 244.286, p < .001$ : significantly greater percentages of children who had been officially reported missing were under the supervision of Probation, while significantly lower percentages were under the supervision of Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services/Child and Family Services only.

**Table 2: Descriptives for Children in Out-of-Home Placements on 1/20/2020 and Bivariate Comparisons for Children who were Missing from Out-of-Home Placements and Children who were Not Missing from Out-of-Home Placements ( $N = 4,103$ )**

	Total Sample $N = 4,103$		Missing from Placement $n = 114$		Not Missing from Placement $n = 3,989$		$t / \chi^2$ test
	$N$	%	$n$	%	$n$	%	
<b>Sex</b>							$\chi^2 (2) = .404$ $p = .817$
<b>Female</b>	1,927	46.97	56	49.12	1871	49.60	
<b>Male</b>	2,169	52.86	58	50.88	2111	52.92	
<b>Age at PIT Count</b>	$M = 10.17$ ; $SD = 5.91$ Range = 0-19 years		$M = 16.76$ ; $SD = 1.31$ Range = 12-19 years		$M = 9.98$ ; $SD = 5.89$ Range = 0-19 years		$t (277.834) = -43.958$ $p < .001$
<b>Race</b>							$\chi^2 (6) = 22.730$ $p < .001$
<b>Hispanic</b>	817	19.91	24	21.05	793	19.88	
<b>White, Not Hispanic</b>	1,876	45.72	38	33.33	1,838	46.08	
<b>Black, Not Hispanic</b>	799	19.47	36	31.58	763	19.13	
<b>American Indian/Alaska Native, Not Hispanic</b>	183	4.46	9	7.89	174	4.36	
<b>Asian, Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander, Not Hispanic</b>	37	.90	0	-	37	0.93	
<b>Other Race or unknown, Not Hispanic</b>	46	1.12	3	2.63	43	1.08	
<b>Multiracial, Not Hispanic</b>	345	8.41	4	3.51	341	8.55	
<b>Number of Times in Care, Lifetime</b>	$M = 1.52$ ; Median = 1.00 $SD = .98$ ; Range = 1-12		$M = 2.59$ ; Median = 2.00 $SD = 1.66$ ; Range = 1-8		$M = 1.49$ ; Median = 1.00 $SD = .94$ ; Range = 1-12		$t (115.094) = -7.022$ $p < .001$
<b>Number of Out-of-Home Placements, Lifetime</b>	$M = 4.10$ ; Median = 2.00 $SD = 4.97$ ; Range = 1-62		$M = 8.89$ ; Median = 7.00 $SD = 7.65$ ; Range = 1-37		$M = 3.96$ ; Median = 2.00 $SD = 4.81$ ; Range = 1-62		$t (115.564) = -6.850$ $p < .001$
<b>Days in Placement at PIT or Last Placement Before Missing</b>	$M = 199.49$ ; Median = 134.00 $SD = 208.45$ ; Range = 4-2,287		$M = 103.52$ ; Median = 59.00 $SD = 134.96$ ; Range = 5-919		$M = 202.23$ ; Median = 138.00 $SD = 209.53$ ; Range = 4-2,287		$t (129.087) = 7.553$ $p < .001$

**Table 2: Descriptives for Children in Out-of-Home Placements on 1/20/2020 and Bivariate Comparisons for Children who were Missing from Out-of-Home Placements and Children who were Not Missing from Out-of-Home Placements ( $N = 4,103$ )  
Continued**

	Total Sample $N = 4,103$		Missing from Placement $n = 114$		Not Missing from Placement $n = 3,989$		$t / \chi^2$ test
	$N$	%	$n$	%	$n$	%	
<b>Placement at PIT or Last Placement Before Missing</b>							$\chi^2 (7) = 105.426$ $p < .001$
Foster Home (relative or fictive/kinship)	1,575	38.39	14	12.28	1,564	39.13	
Foster Home (non-relative)	1,156	28.17	32	28.07	1,124	28.18	
Group Home	236	5.75	19	16.67	217	5.44	
Institution	249	6.07	16	14.04	233	5.84	
Supervised Independent Living	43	1.05	3	2.63	40	1.00	
Trial Home Visit	389	9.48	1	.88	388	9.73	
Detention Facility	245	5.97	9	7.89	236	5.92	
Near Permanency Placement	210	5.12	20 <sup>a</sup>	17.54	190	4.76	
Listed as Missing from Care in FCRO at PIT	84	2.05	51	60.71	33	39.29	$\chi^2 (1) = 1065.593$ $p < .001$
<b>Agency Involvement at PIT</b>							$\chi^2 (5) = 244.286$ $p < .001$
NDHHS/CFS Only	3,279	79.92	30	26.32	3249	81.45	
NDHHS/CFS and Probation	149	3.63	16	14.04	133	3.33	
NDHHS, OJS, and Probation	111	2.71	2	1.75	109	2.73	
NDHHS and OJS Only	8	0.19	1	.88	7	0.18	
Probation Only	555	13.53	65	57.02	490	12.28	



Research question three aimed to address the context of missingness among children who were in out-of-home placements. To address this question, in-depth quantitative and qualitative case information for a subset of officially reported missing children whose case had a review by the FCRO ( $n = 53$ ; 46.49%) was used. However, it is important to note that children's cases are reviewed approximately every six months, not at random. Thus, missing children whose case had been reviewed by FCRO and missing children whose case had not been reviewed by FCRO first were compared to assess any identifiable differences (see Table 3 below). There were no statistically significant differences between the reviewed and not reviewed samples on sex, age, or race/ethnicity. However, the groups varied significantly regarding the number of times a child was in care during their lifetime: the reviewed sample had been in care an average of 1.98 times compared to 3.11 times for the non-reviewed sample,  $t(100.187) = -3.996, p < .001$ . Similarly, the reviewed sample had been in an average of 12.72 different placements during their lifetime compared to 5.57 placements for the non-reviewed sample,  $t(93.771) = 5.484, p < .001$ . Children in the reviewed sample also had significantly fewer days in their placement on January 20, 2020, than children in the non-reviewed sample, a median of 36 days compared to a median of 76 days,  $t(88.278) = -2.438, p = .017$ .

Analyses also revealed significant differences between the two groups regarding the placement types from which they had gone missing,  $\chi^2(7) = 39.222, p < .001$ . For example, in the reviewed sample, children were most likely to go missing from either relative or non-relative foster homes, while in the non-reviewed sample children were most likely to have gone missing after being returned home or from a group home or institution. Among the 51 children who were officially reported missing and listed as "missing from care" in the FCRO records, 60.38% were among the review sample,  $\chi^2(1) = 1.048, p = .360$ . Finally, significant differences were found between the two groups regarding which agency or combination of agencies had supervision of the child when they went missing from care,  $\chi^2(4) = 81.388, p < .001$ . Children in the reviewed sample were most likely to be under the supervision of Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services/Child and Family Services only or in combination with Probation while children in the non-reviewed sample were most likely to be under the supervision of Probation only.

**Table 3: Descriptives for Missing Children in Out-of-Home Placements who had a FCRO Review versus Missing Children in Out-of-Home Placements who did not have a FCRO Review (N=114)**

	Reviewed (n = 53)		Not Reviewed (n = 61)		t / $\chi^2$ test
	n	%	n	%	
<b>Sex</b>					$\chi^2 (1) = 2.218$ $p = .136$
<b>Male</b>	23	43.40	35	57.38	
<b>Female</b>	30	56.60	26	42.62	
<b>Age at PIT</b>	<i>M</i> = 16.22; <i>SD</i> = 1.47 Range = 12-18		<i>M</i> = 16.29; <i>SD</i> = 1.14 Range = 13-18		<i>t</i> (97.505) = -.274 $p = .784$
<b>Race</b>					$\chi^2 (5) = .267$ $p = .998$
<b>Hispanic</b>	11	20.75	13	21.31	
<b>White, Not Hispanic</b>	18	33.96	20	32.79	
<b>Black, Not Hispanic</b>	17	32.08	19	31.15	
<b>American Indian/Alaska Native, Not Hispanic</b>	4	7.55	5	8.20	
<b>Asian, Native Hawaiian, and Other Pacific Islander, Not Hispanic</b>	0	-	0	-	
<b>Other or Unknown Race, Not Hispanic</b>	1	1.89	2	3.28	
<b>Multiracial, Not Hispanic</b>	2	3.77	2	3.28	
<b>Number of Times in Care, Lifetime</b>	<i>M</i> = 1.98; Median = 2.00 <i>SD</i> = 1.12; Range = 1-5		<i>M</i> = 3.11; Median = 3.00 <i>SD</i> = 1.86; Range = 1-8		<i>t</i> (100.187) = -3.996 $p < .001$
<b>Number of Out-of-Home Placements, Lifetime</b>	<i>M</i> = 12.72; Median = 10.00 <i>SD</i> = 7.84; Range = 1-37		<i>M</i> = 5.57; Median = 4.00 <i>SD</i> = 5.72; Range = 1-31		<i>t</i> (93.771) = 5.484 $p < .001$
<b>Days in Placement at PIT or Last Placement Before Missing</b>	<i>M</i> = 72.51; Median = 36.00 <i>SD</i> = 78.50; Range = 5-354		<i>M</i> = 130.45; Median = 76.00 <i>SD</i> = 165.46; Range = 13-919		<i>t</i> (88.278) = -2.438 $p = .017$

**Table 3: Descriptives for Missing Children in Out-of-Home Placements who had a FCRO Review versus Missing Children in Out-of-Home Placements who did not have a FCRO Review (N=114) Continued**

	Reviewed (n = 53)		Not Reviewed (n = 61)		t / $\chi^2$ test
	n	%	n	%	
<b>Placement at PIT</b>					$\chi^2 (7) = 39.222$ $p < .001$
Foster Home (relative or fictive/kinship)	13	18.31	1	2.33	
Foster Home (non-relative)	30	42.25	2	4.65	
Group Home	9	12.68	10	23.26	
Institution	7	9.86	9	20.93	
Supervised Independent Living	2	2.82	1	2.33	
Trial Home Visit	1	1.41	0	-	
Detention Facility	5	7.04	4	9.30	
Near Permanency Placement	4	5.63	16	37.21	
Listed as Missing from Care in FCRO at PIT	32	60.38	21	34.43	$\chi^2 (1) = 1.048$ $p = .306$
<b>Agency Involvement at Missing</b>					$\chi^2 (4) = 81.388$ $p < .001$
NDHHS/CFS	28	52.83	2	3.28	
Probation Only	7	13.21	58	95.08	
NDHHS/CFS & Probation	16	30.19	-	-	
NDHHS/OJS only	-	-	1	1.64	
NDHHS/OJS & Probation	2	3.77	-	-	

Finally, the additional case information available for the reviewed sample ( $n = 53$ ) was examined to better understand the context(s) of children missing who were in out-of-home care placements (see Table 4 below). A review of the quantitative data shows that while 62.26% of these children were enrolled in school, only 24.53% were regularly attending school and 16.98% were earning grades that were on target in more than half of their classes (or more); 43.40% of children were involved in extracurricular activities. Relatedly, nearly 43.40% of children had a current disability diagnosis and more than 15.09% were currently enrolled in special education programming.

Further, 69.81% of children had been diagnosed with a mental health problem; however, less than 40% were receiving mental health services; 13.21% were receiving substance abuse services. Five children (9.43%) had been identified as a suspected or documented victim of sex trafficking and one child (1.89%) had been identified as a suspected or documented victim of labor trafficking.

Findings showed that most children's maternal and paternal rights were intact. Regarding permanency objectives, approximately one third of the reviewed sample aimed to achieve independent living or family preservation or reunification. Another 20.75% identified guardianship, while 13.21% identified adoption as the planned goal. The majority of children's cases stemmed from Douglas County and for children who were on probation, most children were supervised by Probation District 4J.

**Table 4: Descriptives for Sample of Missing Children in Out-of-Home Placements who had a FCRO Review ( $n = 53$ )**

	<i>n</i>	%
<b>Mother's Parental Rights Intact</b>		
Yes	36	67.92%
No	17	32.08%
<b>Father's Parental Rights Intact</b>		
Yes	28	52.83%
No	25	47.17%
<b>Child Currently Enrolled in School</b>		
Yes	33	62.26%
No	20	37.74%
<b>Child Regularly Attends School</b>		
Yes	13	24.53%
No	11	20.75%
Data Not Available	29	54.72%
<b>Child on Target for More than Half of Classes</b>		
Yes	9	16.98%
No	19	35.85%
Data Not Available	25	47.17%
<b>Involved in Extracurricular Activities, Confirmed</b>		
Yes	23	43.40%
No	20	37.74%
Data Not Available	10	18.87%
<b>Documented or Suspected Victim of Sex Trafficking</b>		
Yes	5	9.43%
No	48	90.57%
<b>Documented or Suspected Victim of Labor Trafficking</b>		
Yes	1	1.89%
No	52	98.11%
<b>Current Disability Diagnosis</b>		
Yes	23	43.40%
No	29	54.72%
Data Not Available	1	1.89%
<b>Currently in Special Education</b>		
Yes	8	15.09%
No	31	58.49%
Data Not Available	14	26.42%
<b>Current Mental Health Diagnosis</b>		
Yes	37	69.81%
No	11	20.75%
Data Not Available	5	9.43%

**Table 4: Descriptives for Sample of Missing Children in Out-of-Home Placements who had a FCRO Review (*n* = 53) Continued**

	<i>n</i>	%
<b>Currently Receiving Mental Health Services</b>		
Yes	19	35.85%
No	17	32.08%
Data Not Available	17	32.08%
<b>Currently Receiving Substance Abuse Services</b>		
Yes	7	13.21%
No	9	16.98%
Data Not Available	37	69.81%
<b>Primary Permanency Objective</b>		
Adoption	7	13.21%
APPLA/Independent Living	18	33.96%
Family Preservation/Reunification	17	32.07%
Guardianship	11	20.75%
<b>Court Associated with Current Episode</b>		
Adams	1	1.89%
Buffalo	2	3.77%
Dawes	1	1.89%
Douglas	31	58.49%
Gage	1	1.89%
Hall	3	5.66%
Jefferson	1	1.89%
Lancaster	10	18.87%
Sarpy	3	5.66%
<b>Probation District Associated with Current Episode</b>		
District 1	2	3.77%
District 10	1	1.89%
District 12	1	1.89%
District 2	3	5.66%
District 3J	10	18.87%
District 4J	31	58.49%
District 9	5	9.43%

To further examine the context of missingness among children in out-of-home care, case summaries for children who had a review were analyzed (see Table 5 below). Children were anonymized with pseudonyms. This analysis was informed by the body of previous research suggesting that children in foster care often “run” to something/someone or from something/someone. Here, case summaries revealed that 2 children (3.77%) ran to a trusted adult, despite literature suggesting it as likely, no children in the present sample ran to a boyfriend/girlfriend. Six (11.32%) case summaries suggested the child ran from placement as a coping strategy: repeatedly leaving a placement had become an established pattern of behavior for these children. For example, one summary notes that “Matt has shown in the past that he does not have good coping skills when he is upset or feels out of control. He has not taken any steps to learn any new coping ... [he] has expressed a desire to stop running, but he has repeatedly not been able to control his impulses and has run anyway”.

Beyond the “running to, running from” dichotomy several other key areas of concern were identified. The most striking finding was the role mental health challenges seemed to play in the lives of missing children who were in an out-of-home placement. Analyses revealed that in 45 of the 53 case summaries reviewed (84.91%), the child was either in need of or participating in mental health services. Often, missingness was the reason that a child’s mental health care was not being properly managed. When a child went missing their services were terminated and if they returned to care, the continuity of care across service providers was challenging: a child may not be able to return to the same counselor, therapist, and/or physician. Thus, any progress made, or trust built prior to their missingness may be lost and the process of assisting the child must start from the beginning.

Further, 16 case summaries (30.19%) revealed that the child was treatment resistant. For example, a case summary may indicate treatment resistance with a note such as “Morgan is not participating in therapy services and is resistant to participating in services,” or “Michael is unwilling to participate in therapy services”. Treatment resistance included resistance or refusal to participate in therapy or other psychiatric counseling, refusal to consider taking recommended medications, or failure to remain medication compliant. Additionally, case summaries for 26 (49.05%) children discussed substance use problems; however, according to the quantitative data only 7 children (13.21%) were receiving services for substance abuse issues. Finally, 5 (9.43%) summaries indicated that in at least one placement in the child’s history the reason the placement was terminated was related to the child’s mental health and that the child’s behavior was more than the foster caregivers felt they could handle.

Quantitative data also indicated that five children were suspected or documented victims of sex trafficking victimization, and 1 child was a suspected victim of labor trafficking (11.32%). The implications of this victimization were discussed in three of the case summaries, and in one of the cases, the child’s missingness from placement was linked to trafficking victimization directly. The summary indicated, “...it was reported to Probation that during Jenny’s last event running, she was found in a hotel with adult males. There is a concern that she could have been abused or exploited by these men”. At the same time, narratives suggested that children often did not recognize their experience as victimization. For example, one case summary read, “Sarah does not view herself as a victim and has not been agreeable to any interventions, despite law enforcement involvement”. Additionally, one of the summaries revealed that a child had likely been a victim of labor trafficking; however, no further details were available for analysis.

Problems in school were another recurring theme in these case summaries. Irregular attendance in school was discussed in the case summaries for 28 children (52.83%). Guardians reported that the children felt that they did not need to attend school, and it was common for the guardian to indicate that they had trouble getting the child to attend school. For example, one summary noted that, “Jeremy has changed schools a number of times due to his placement changes and he has a history of truancy. Even when he was in school, he usually refused to do his work, so he has failed most classes. He is so far behind in credits; he knows he won’t be able to graduate so he is not motivated and doesn’t see the point in trying.” Another theme identified in relation to school was children’s behavioral issues when they did attend school. Behavioral issues in school were indicated in 19 (35.85%) case summaries. For example, one summary revealed that “Darius has been suspended on numerous occasions and has over 55 instances this school year

which have resulted in disciplinary actions.”

In addition to mental health and school problems, the third major area of concern identified in the qualitative analysis was children’s permanency objective. In 3 cases (5.66%) the summary indicated that the child did not agree with their stated permanency objective. In some instances, the child indicated that they had another preference for where or with whom they should live. For example, one summary indicated that “When asked what would make him successful, Allan responded with “living with mom”. He indicates that things are going well in the current placement, but there is nothing better “than living with mom.” However, in many cases the child simply objected to their current permanency objective.

In addition, some children objected to their permanency objective due to inappropriate contact from the family of origin. In 5 cases (9.43%), a parent from the child’s family of origin was contacting the children despite not being allowed visitation or contact by the courts. For example, one summary read, “All four children contact one another telephonically. It was discovered, the children’s group chat included their mother, which was not being allowed due to lack of supervision”. In these cases, this “false hope” of reunification became a significant issue for the child who might otherwise do well in their placement and/or resulted in negative behaviors from the child.

Violence and victimization in placement were also identified as a *barrier to permanency* for children. Six children (11.32%) had committed violence in their placements, and each time there was violence, the child was moved to another placement. Primarily, this violence comprised of physical fights with other children in the placement or with the adult guardian. One example of violence in the placement in a summary read “She recently assaulted Mr. Smith twice. She broke his glasses but did not cause any injury to him. Anna broke a window”. Additionally, 12 children (22.64%) were victims of violence in a placement. In these instances, it is usually a family member of the children or a friend/relative of the adult(s) in the placement who is responsible for perpetrating the victimization. For example, one children’s summary indicated that they had been sexually assaulted by a cousin while in a placement.

Finally, the analysis of the case summaries revealed that in 9 cases (15.09%) there was evidence that someone, usually the case worker or a family member of the child, knew where the child was while they were missing from their placement. In 4 cases (7.55%), a family member was aiding the children in staying missing. For example, one summary indicated “The relatives had harbored the children while they were on run and did not notify” and in another instance the summary indicated “Ms. Jones indicates she has consistent contact with Jason but is unwilling to disclose his whereabouts”.



<b>Table 5 : Key Themes in Qualitative Analysis of FCRO Case Summaries (n = 53)</b>		
	<b><i>n</i></b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Running To...</b>		
<b>A Trusted Adult</b>	2	3.77%
<b>Running From...</b>		
<b>As a Coping Mechanism</b>	6	11.32%
<b>Children Mental Health Challenges</b>	45	84.91%
<b>Children Treatment Resistance</b>	16	30.19%
<b>Placement Not Prepared for Mental Health Challenge</b>	5	9.43%
<b>Sex Trafficking Victimization</b>	3	5.66%
<b>Children Substance Use</b>	26	49.05%
<b>School Problems</b>		
<b>Truancy/Attendance Issues</b>	28	52.83%
<b>Behavioral Issues</b>	19	35.85%
<b>Permanency Objective Issues</b>		
<b>Children Objects to Placement</b>	3	5.66%
<b>Violence in any Placement</b>	12	22.64%
<b>Victimization in any Placement</b>	6	11.32%
<b>Family of Origin Inappropriate Contact</b>	5	9.43%
<b>At least one Adult knew where the Child was while Missing</b>	9	15.09%

## Implications and Recommendations

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A significant body of prior research has examined the prevalence and context of children who run away from foster care (Courtney et al., 2005; Lin, 2012; Witherup et al., 2008), however little is known about children who *go missing* who were in out-of-home care placements. The present study used unique data from a point-in-time count of missing persons in Nebraska and administrative data from the Nebraska Foster Care Review Office to address this gap in the literature. First, findings showed that nearly 30% of children who had been reported missing in Nebraska were in out-of-home care placements. Missing children who were in out-of-home care placements had more complete data (e.g., a known race/ethnicity) and had been missing for shorter periods of time than children who were missing from their families of origin. These differences may be due to the available data and multiple people – case workers, foster caregivers, probation officers – who have responsibility for the safety and security of children in out-of-home care as well as the policies and procedures for reporting missing children. However, these policies and practices are largely unknown, and for example, among probation, not publicly available. As such, additional research is needed to understand if policies and/or processes for communication between system actors regarding reporting children who are missing from out-of-home placements could be improved.

Further examination of the population of children who were in out-of-home care placements showed that 2.77% were missing from care; this finding is consistent with other research using point-in-time count data such as Lin's (2012) study showing that 2% of children in the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System data were not present in their foster care placements (i.e., listed as a runaway). Also, consistent with prior research regarding children who are identified as “runaways” from foster care, children who were older (Courtney et al., 2005, Courtney & Zinn, 2009; Dworsky et al., 2018) or had more times in care (Clark et al., 2008; Courtney et al., 2005) or more placements (Children's Bureau, 2018) were more likely to be missing from care than children who were younger or had fewer placements. In addition, less time in a child's current placement was associated with missingness. Also consistent with prior studies on children identified as runaways from foster placements, White children were underrepresented as missing from care while children of color were overrepresented as missing from care (Lin, 2012; Nesmith, 2006; Wulczyn, 2020); American Indian/Alaska Native children were missing at more than 1.5 times their rate of representation in Nebraska's out-of-home care population, while Black children were missing at 1.62 times their representation.

Also consistent with prior literature, children who were missing from care were disproportionately missing from a group home or institution (Courtney et al., 2005; Witherup et al., 2008). Children in a relative or kinship foster home were underrepresented among missing children. Departing from the literature on children who run away from foster care (see Courtney et al., 2005; Witherup et al., 2008), children who had been returned home to their family of origin were also disproportionately missing. Indeed, while only 5.12% of all children who were in out-of-home placements in Nebraska were in *any type* of near permanency placement at the point in time of study, 17.54% of children who were missing from placements were missing from their family of origin after being returned home. These findings prompt questions regarding the decision-making process for reunification: Were these children returned too soon, were underlying factors related to prior episodes of missingness from care left unaddressed?

Finally, children who were missing from care were disproportionately under the supervision of Probation, either alone or concurrently with Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services/Child and Family Services. Prior research demonstrates that children who are under the supervision of probation, as well as “cross-over” children (i.e., those children who are under supervision by both child welfare and youth justice agencies), often have significant needs including mental health, substance use, and trauma histories (Herz & Ryan, 2008; Young et al., 2015), factors that have also been associated with running away from care in previous literature (e.g., Lin, 2012). However, the prevalence of these children among officially reported missing children may also be due to a heightened level of supervision compared to children in out-of-home care placements that are not supervised by probation. Additional research must attempt to unpack whether possible system-level policies yield at least some responsibility for these disparities.

Examination of children’s FCRO review summaries shed some light on the underlying factors associated with missingness among the out-of-home care population. Specifically, among the reviewed sample, there was evidence that few children had bonds to school (i.e., through attendance or passing grades) and less than half had any reported extracurricular activities. In addition, there were high rates of mental health diagnoses coupled with low rates of reported receipt of mental health and/or substance abuse treatment services. These qualitative data suggested that for many children who were missing from care, the relationships between these risk factors and missingness was complex and likely moderated by significant levels of placement instability.

Children had experienced multiple placement changes, potentially because of behavioral issues including leaving their out-of-home care placements, which in turn, impacted opportunities to achieve in school and disrupted relationships with mental and behavioral health specialists. Changes in mental and behavioral health specialists also require children to repeatedly (re)disclose trauma and victimization histories to these new care providers. Minimizing the number of times child victims of abuse must (re)tell their story to different system actors has been identified as a best practice in child abuse forensic interviewing (Jones et al., 2005). The present findings highlight the need to consider ways to minimize repeated disclosures for system involved children as they move care placements.

In addition, several children, all teenagers, reported leaving their placements to live with another caregiver whom they preferred. In these types of cases – cases where children have repeatedly left an out-of-home placement for a preferred adult caregiver – system-level decision makers might consider whether optimal outcomes for children will be achieved by listening to the youth’s placement preference and providing supportive services to this caregiver. Similarly, these findings suggest in some cases children’s otherwise successful placements are disrupted by non-custodial parents, who for example, aid children in leaving their placements or provide children with misinformation regarding family reunification. Taken together these findings are in line with prior research on running away that suggests that children may run to preferred or trusted adults or caregivers (Crosland et al., 2018; Crosland & Dunlap, 2014; Courtney et al., 2005).

Findings further showed evidence consistent with prior research suggesting that children might run from a placement due to violence or victimization (Crosland et al., 2018; Crosland & Dunlap, 2014; Courtney et al., 2005). In some cases, there was evidence of abuse in the out-of-home care placement or suspicion or documentation of trafficking victimization. Prior research shows that children in out-of-home care experience higher rates of physical and sexual abuse (Euser et al., 2014) and exposures to violence (Turney & Wildeman, 2017) when compared to children living in biological families. Further, evidence suggests that children “on the run” from foster placements may be particularly vulnerable to trafficking victimization (Latzman, 2019). The present findings highlight the need to consider victimization experiences as a risk factor for missingness among children who were in out-of-home placements and that a higher level of training for foster caregivers is likely needed to keep children who have experienced victimizations in a previous placement present in their next placement. Likewise, ways to improve children’s connections with foster care providers should be considered. Finally, results prompt questions about whether the term “runaway” should be used to describe children who are missing from their care placements and how and when the distinction between “runaway” and “missing child” are made.

## Limitations and Future Research

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While the present study provided novel evaluation of missingness among children who were in an out-of-home placement, several limitations must be noted. To begin, these data stemmed from a point-in-time count of missing persons, and thus, did not capture children who went missing and were found before January 20, 2020, or went missing after January 20, 2020. In addition, the most detailed administrative data from FCRO were only available for children who had a recent review, and reviewed children only included about half of the children who had been officially reported missing from their care placement. There are many reasons that children might not have a review, such as 1) reviews typically are not conducted for children in care less than 6 months, 2) processes for probation reviews make it difficult to add alternative cases if a child returns home prior to review, 3) priority is given to cases with upcoming court dates, and 4) many probation cases do not have court reviews, among others. As such, the qualitative data from the review sample was not representative of the total population of children who were missing from care placements.

Future research must continue to examine the linkages between going missing and out-of-home care placements. Recent research has identified the disparate impact of missingness in Black and Native American communities (Richards et al., 2021). Given the disproportionate involvement of Black and Native American children in the foster care system and among children identified as runaways from foster care (Lin, 2012), these relationships must be further unpacked. Likewise, future research should examine the prevalence of children who identify as LGBTQ+ who are missing from an out-of-home placement as these children are disproportionately represented among foster children (Gambon et al., 2020). Finally, the present findings suggest that children who were in out-of-home care placements due to their delinquency status should be an explicit focus of additional inquiry as should the relationships between violence and victimization and missingness among children in out-of-home placements.

## Conclusions

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While prior research has addressed predictors of running away from foster care, it is unclear how prior studies have made the distinction between children who are missing from care and children who have run away from care. The present study took a novel approach by examining the prevalence of children who had been officially reported missing within the population of children who were in out-of-home placements. Findings demonstrated that nearly one third of missing children were missing from state care and that these children were more likely to be children of color, to have spent more time in state care with less placement stability, and to be under probation supervision than children who were in out-of-home placements who were not missing from care. Future research and policy priorities must focus on ways to identify and intervene in the lives of children in out-of-home placements before they go missing from care.

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