

National Center for Missing & Exploited Children®

2016 AMBER Alert Report

Analysis of AMBER Alert Cases in 2016



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Introduction

The afternoon of Jan. 13, 1996, Amber Hagerman, a 9-year-old girl who lived in Arlington, Texas, was last seen riding her bike in a parking lot. A witness saw a man with a black, flat-bed truck snatch Amber from her bicycle. Four days later Amber's body was found in a creek 3.2 miles from her home. Her murder remains unsolved. Dallas-Fort Worth area residents were outraged and began calling radio stations not only to vent their anger and frustration but also to offer suggestions to prevent such crimes in the future. One person, Diana Simone, suggested a program be implemented allowing use of the Emergency Alert System, known as EAS, to notify the public when a child has been abducted. If the community was aware then residents could also assist in the search. Ms. Simone followed up with a letter, and her only request was the program be dedicated to the memory of Amber Hagerman. That letter was used by broadcasters who met with local law enforcement and created Amber's Plan, in Amber Hagerman's memory.

This program was eventually taken to the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children®, known as NCMEC, with a request for a national initiative. It then became known as America's Missing: Broadcast Emergency Response or the AMBER Plan, which allows broadcasters and transportation authorities to immediately distribute information about recent child abductions to the public and enables the entire community to assist in the search for and safe recovery of the child. What began as a local effort in the Dallas-Fort Worth, Texas, area has grown into a seamless system of such programs in every state across the country. Each year these alerts help safely recover abducted children. Since the inception of the program in 1996 through Dec. 31, 2016, 867 children have been safely recovered specifically as a result of an AMBER Alert being issued.

This program is a voluntary partnership among law enforcement agencies, broadcasters, transportation agencies and the wireless industry to activate an urgent bulletin in the most serious cases of child abduction. Broadcasters use EAS to air a description of the abducted child and suspected abductor. This is the same concept used during severe weather emergencies. The goal of an AMBER Alert is to instantly galvanize the entire community to assist in the search for and safe recovery of the child. In the summer of 2004 NCMEC began to develop a network of internet content providers, trucking industry associations, social networking websites, digital billboards and wireless industry representatives to further enhance the alerting capabilities of each state/territory's AMBER Alert program. The AMBER Alert program has now evolved to use all available technology when alerting the public. More recently, Wireless Emergency Alerts and targeted distribution on social media continue to improve and expand the reach of the AMBER Alert program.

April 30, 2003, President George W. Bush signed into law the Prosecutorial Remedies and Other Tools to end the Exploitation of Children Today or PROTECT Act of 2003 (Pub. L. No. 108-21). Building on the steps already taken by the Bush Administration to support AMBER Alerts, this act established the national coordination of state and local programs, including the development of guidance for issuance and dissemination of AMBER Alerts and the appointment of a national AMBER Alert coordinator within the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Justice Programs.

The national AMBER Alert coordinator, in collaboration with a national advisory group, developed a strategy for supporting states and communities to strengthen the AMBER Alert System nationwide and increase the likelihood abducted children will be recovered swiftly and safely.¹

AMBER Alert Definitions

This report presents information about AMBER Alerts issued throughout the U.S., Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands from Jan. 1, 2016, through Dec. 31, 2016, and intaked by NCMEC. Although an AMBER Alert case may be activated in multiple areas, this report only accounts for alerts in the state/territory of first activation. This report analyzes cases according to the case type for which the AMBER Alert was issued, not the case type at the time of recovery.

When a law enforcement agency is notified about an abducted child, it must first determine if that child's case meets the program's AMBER Alert criteria. The U.S. Department of Justice's recommended guidelines are:

- There is reasonable belief by law enforcement an abduction has occurred.
- The abduction is of a child age 17 or younger.
- The law enforcement agency believes the child is in imminent danger of serious bodily injury or death.
- There is enough descriptive information about the victim and abduction for law enforcement to issue an AMBER Alert to assist in the recovery of the child.
- The child's name and other critical data elements, including the Child Abduction flag, have been entered into the National Crime Information Center, known as NCIC, database.

An AMBER Alert may involve one or more children and is issued on either a state/territory, regional or local level. Once an AMBER Alert is activated, the alert may be issued in another state/territory at the request of the originating state's AMBER Alert coordinator, thus creating a **multistate/territory activation**. A state-/territory wide alert is issued in the entire state or territory, a regional alert is issued in multiple counties and a local alert is issued in one county or a smaller geographic area. Although an AMBER Alert can be issued in multiple states or territories, it is never issued on a nationwide basis. AMBER Alerts are geographically targeted based on law enforcement's investigation.

At the outset of an AMBER Alert case, law enforcement categorizes the case as one of the four types listed below, defined for the purposes of this report as:

- **Family abduction** or FA – A family abduction is defined as the taking, retention or concealment of a child, younger than 18 years of age, by a parent, other person with a family relationship to the child, or his or her agent, in violation of the custody rights, including visitation rights of a parent or legal guardian.
- **Nonfamily abduction** or NFA – A nonfamily abduction is defined as the unauthorized taking, retention, luring, confinement or concealment of a child younger than the age of 18 by someone other than a family member.
- **Lost, injured or otherwise missing** or LIM – Lost, injured or otherwise missing is defined as any missing child younger than the age of 18 when there are insufficient facts to determine the cause of the child's disappearance or any child 10 years of age or younger who is missing on his or her own accord.
- **Endangered runaway** or ERU – Any missing child between 11 and 17 years of age who is missing of his or her own accord and whose whereabouts are unknown to his or her parent(s) or legal guardian.

Law enforcement may determine an AMBER Alert should be re-categorized based on new information developed during the case investigation. For example when the AMBER Alert is issued law enforcement may believe the child is an NFA victim, but at the conclusion of the case may determine the child was in fact an ERU.

Law enforcement occasionally encounters cases in which an AMBER Alert should not have been issued later determining those cases were either **unfounded** or a **hoax**:

- A **hoax** occurs when an individual falsely reports a child missing or when a child reports him- or herself missing with the intent to mislead law enforcement.
- An **unfounded** case occurs when a child is reported missing based on available information at the time, but the investigation determines a child was never missing.

Cases are categorized as **resolved** when any of the criteria listed below are met:

- The child returns home to his or her parent or legal guardian, the child remains in the custody of law enforcement or the child is in contact with his or her parent or legal guardian but will not be returning home and the parents or legal guardian and law enforcement are satisfied with the situation. A child's case can only be labeled recovered/deceased if a body has been found and positively identified.
- If law enforcement closes the case and the child has not been recovered or if the parents/guardians state in writing they no longer want NCMEC to assist with their child's case.

A child's recovery is considered a **success story** when his or her safe recovery occurred as a direct result of the AMBER Alert being issued. For example, an individual may recognize the vehicle involved in the alert and report the sighting to law enforcement leading to the safe rescue of the child.

Summary of AMBER Alerts

From Jan. 1, 2016, to Dec. 31, 2016, 179 AMBER Alerts were issued in the U.S. involving 231 children.

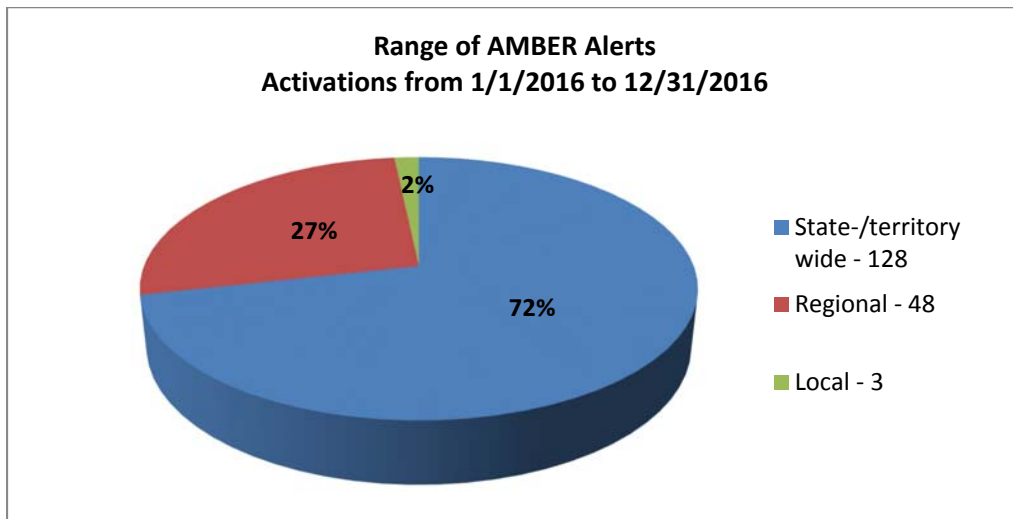
At the time the AMBER Alert cases were intaked at NCMEC there were 107 FAs, 60 NFAs, six LIMs and six ERUs. Eight cases were later determined to be hoaxes, and 13 cases were later determined to be unfounded.

Of the 179 AMBER Alerts issued from Jan. 1, 2016, to Dec. 31, 2016, 155 cases resulted in a recovery, 43 of which were successfully recovered as a direct result of an AMBER Alert being issued. As of Feb. 24, 2017, when statistics for this report were finalized, for the AMBER Alerts issued in 2016, three children remained actively missing and 13 children were located deceased.

AMBER Alerts by Range

In 2016, 72 percent (n=128) of AMBER Alerts were issued state-/territory wide, 27 percent (n=48) of AMBER Alerts were issued regionally and 2 percent (n=3) of AMBER Alerts were issued locally.

Figure 1: Range of AMBER Alerts



AMBER Alerts by State/Territory

From Jan. 1, 2016, to Dec. 31, 2016, 179 AMBER Alerts were issued in 38 states. Texas issued the most AMBER Alerts with 9 percent (n=16) followed by Georgia and Florida with 7 percent each (n=13 and 12).

Table 1: Number and Percent of AMBER Alert Cases by State/Territory

State/Territory	Number of alerts	Percent
Texas	16	9
Georgia	13	7
Florida	12	7
Michigan	11	6
California and North Carolina	10 each	6 each
Arizona and Colorado	8 each	4 each
Indiana, Missouri and New Mexico	7 each	4 each
Ohio, Utah and Washington	6 each	3 each
Montana, Tennessee and Virginia	5 each	3 each
Kansas	4	2
Nebraska, New York and Pennsylvania	3 each	2 each
Arkansas, Idaho, Iowa, Nevada, Oklahoma, West Virginia and Wisconsin	2 each	1 each
Connecticut, Illinois, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Mississippi, North Dakota, South Carolina and South Dakota	1 each	0.6 each
Alabama, Alaska, Delaware, District of Columbia, Hawaii, Kentucky, Louisiana, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Oregon, Puerto Rico, Rhode Island, U.S. Virgin Islands, Vermont and Wyoming	0 each	0 each
Total	179	100

Multistate/Territory AMBER Alerts

When an AMBER Alert is issued an abductor may take the child outside the jurisdiction of the issuing law enforcement authority. In some cases the AMBER Alert coordinator in the state/territory where the AMBER Alert originated may request an AMBER Alert be extended into another state/territory. In 2016, 21 AMBER Alerts were extended beyond the limits of the state where the AMBER Alert first originated.

Table 2: List of Multistate/Territory AMBER Alerts

Originating	Extending
Arkansas	Kansas, Kentucky and Oklahoma
Connecticut	New York
Florida	Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky and Tennessee
Florida	Georgia
Georgia	South Carolina
Georgia	Texas

