

Research Report

# **“Child Alert”: public information dissemination of child disappearances**

Research within the framework of developing  
a “Child Alert system”, a project coordinated by Child Focus

*Veerle Pashley, Els Enhus, Mark Leys*



Co-funded by the  
European Commission



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# Foreword

**T**he quality of a constitutional state can be measured by, among other things, the degree to which it cherishes and protects its children. Public authorities and citizens take responsibility for the weakest. Certainly in Belgium, where we have repeatedly been confronted with violence and injustice with regard to children, that sensitivity is very strong.

In various countries we are seeing the emergence of Child Alert systems. These are notification systems by which large portions of the population can be informed in a very short time of especially disturbing disappearances of children. In the event of immediate danger to life it is of great importance to bring the situation to a resolution as quickly as possible. Although no scientific research yet exists on effectiveness and performance, the assumption is that relevant testimony from the public can help in locating the missing child.

The European Parliament and the European Commission, in particular the Directorate General for Justice, support the development of Child Alert systems and the strengthening of cross-border collaboration in Europe very strongly by means of, among other things, a call for proposals to all member states in 2008. Child Focus took part in this. Many partners, including the *General Prosecutor's Office* and the *Federal Prosecutor's Office*, the *Missing Persons Unit* and the *Wanted Notices Unit of the Federal Police*, the *Criminal Policy Department of the Ministry of Justice*, the *Criminology Department of the "Vrije Universiteit Brussel"* (VUB) and the *European Federation for Missing and Sexually Exploited Children "Missing Children Europe"* (MCE), were quick to agree to collaborate, for which we sincerely thank them.

The project comprises, in addition to specification of the legal framework and methods of collaboration between the partners, creation of a public website and a technical platform that offers the public or organisations the possibility of subscribing to missing persons notices. If all goes as planned, the Belgian Child Alert is to be launched in February 2011.

The basic idea of a Child Alert system may be simple, but its implementation is not. A number of factors and variables play a role in this. There is no point in designing a system that is not adaptable to the existing police and judicial practices of the country involved, or that does not take into account cultural sensitivities. Therefore we found it useful to request that the Criminology Department of VUB did a study in advance of the internal organisation of dissemination of information in Child Focus and make an international comparative overview of the basic principles of notification systems. Researcher Veerle Pashley and her supervisors Professor Mark Leys and Professor Els Enhus succeeded

in presenting a number of insights and making recommendations for the design of new systems in an extremely short time. An important lesson the research project teaches is that development of Child Alert systems is not only a technological problem, but a matter of collaboration and development of networks between partners from various sectors. The development of Child Alert systems that also deal with cross-border disappearances should take account of local cultures and roles and the different working methods of partner organisations. In this respect, the report teaches that a Child Alert system must be supportive of collaboration between partners. The technological problem of interoperability and IT standards must be incorporated into an approach that makes collaboration and consultation possible and ensures rapid action.

These insights will undoubtedly keep us from making certain mistakes, and will be used to ensure the quality of the Belgian Child Alert.

We would like to thank everyone who has worked on this study; in addition to the project partners listed above, also a number of police officers and NGOs from the various EU member states.

In particular we want to thank *The Greek Centre for Missing and Sexually Exploited Children* (GR), the National Office for Missing Children (NL), *Initiatieve Vermisste Kinder* (DE), the *French Ministry of Justice* (FR) and the *Missing Persons Bureau* (UK) for their generous cooperation.

The work considered is a snapshot that in no way aspires to be the ultimate encyclopaedia of Child Alert systems. The time and resources available were far too limited for this. But the study contains a wealth of insights and ideas that are extremely useful for anyone who takes the issue of missing children to heart. The exploratory study also makes it very clear that further comparative and in-depth evaluation studies of such systems can certainly help policy.

**Kristine Kloeck,**  
*General Director, Child Focus*





# Abstract

This report describes the communication trajectory of the Belgian NGO “Child Focus”. In addition five other European Child Alert systems (France, Germany, Greece, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom) are studied and compared. The analysis is based on document and website analysis, focus groups, short questionnaires and contacts/interviews with local correspondents.

The main results of the analysis can be summarized as follows:

- European alert models are much inspired by the US Amber Alert instrument. While the US Amber Alert system was aimed at *developing* a broadcasting system, the European Alert project is intended at designing a *reviewed* dissemination process, since many European countries already have locally developed a broadcasting system.
- The development of Child Alert systems is built on the assumption that involving citizens in what is essentially a *policing process*, contributes to locating the disappeared minor. However, no results of evaluation studies at this stage support this assumption. Neither is evaluation research available on the efficiency of the development of Child Alert systems.
- The comparative analysis learns that core concepts such as ‘minority’, ‘child disappearances’, ‘extremely worrying’ and ‘collaboration strategies’ are used differently in the daily practice of the respective systems.
- The development and use of Child Alert systems are an issue of collaboration between partners with different backgrounds. The mix of partners involved and the local context explains many differences in social construction of the Child Alert system.
- The international focus in developing and disseminating information remains underexposed.
- The technological tools and dissemination strategies differ between countries. Every country is seeking ways to speed up the distribution of information of the networks by means of technological applications.

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# 1. Background and aim of this report

## 1.1. The start of Child Alert systems

Child Alert systems are modes and models of broadcasting and disseminating information in order to involve the public to obtain useful information on worrying child and adolescent disappearances. Different broadcasting and dissemination tools are generally used (alone or in combination). A child alert is *“a message that conveys information about a recently missing or abducted person, usually displayed on electronic signs positioned along roadways and broadcast by mass media, intended to enlist the public’s help in finding the abducted person and often in catching the abductor”* ([www.thefreedictionary.com/Amber+Alert](http://www.thefreedictionary.com/Amber+Alert)).

The origin of Child Alert systems lays in America. In 1996 in Arlington, Texas, a nine-year old girl named Amber Hagerman was abducted and murdered by an unknown perpetrator (Griffin, Miller, Hoppe et al., 2007: 378). On the day of her kidnapping a neighbour witnessed the scenery and alerted the authorities (documents Amber Alert Hellas). The discovery of Ambers’ body four days later initiated a public debate about *‘the need of a formal registration system that is designed to publicize information on a rapid basis’* (Miller, Griffin, Clinkinbeard & Thomas, 2009: 111). This debate resulted in the development of a nationwide dissemination mechanism by which messages can be broadcasted on short notice (Griffin, Miller, Hoppe et al., 2007: 378). This project ‘AMBER’ (‘America’s Missing: Broadcast Emergency Response’) was coordinated by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), law enforcement, mass media and public/private agencies (documents Amber Alert Hellas). Its main aim is to elicit information of citizens that could be helpful for the police-investigation to recover abducted children as quickly as possible so that their kidnappers won’t harm them (Griffin, Miller, Hoppe et al., 2007: 378). Various officials are convinced that a rapid response is necessary in order to save an abducted youngster’s life since they assume that most victims die very shortly after the kidnapping (Griffin & Miller, 2008: 162).

Worldwide different countries are creating Child Alert systems or already have one (e.g. Canada, Australia, Malaysia...). Developments are taking form in Europe too.

The European Commission developed a policy ‘Towards an EU strategy on the Rights of the Child’<sup>1</sup>. Within this framework a working paper has been developed on how to create an alert system throughout Europe<sup>2</sup>, based on discussions from representatives of the police and/or judicial authorities from all the Member States. In Lisbon, on October 2007, an agreement was set up to create an EU wide Child Alert system. How this system is set up and its scope depends entirely on the European Member States ([ec.europa.eu/justice/policies/children/violence/policies\\_children\\_violence\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/justice/policies/children/violence/policies_children_violence_en.htm)).

1 [europa.eu/legislation\\_summaries/human\\_rights/fundamental\\_rights\\_within\\_european\\_union/r12555\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/human_rights/fundamental_rights_within_european_union/r12555_en.htm)

2 More information can be found in the Commission Staff Working Document: best practices for launching a cross-border child abduction alert, Commission of the European Communities, Brussel 24/11/2008.

The United Kingdom launched their first Child Rescue Alert in 2002. The project was introduced slowly throughout England and Wales. It took time to convince everyone to integrate the system in customary working procedures. In the period 2004-2006 France implemented an alert system. Greece launched Amber Alert Hellas in 2007 after the disappearance of a boy whose whereabouts were never discovered. The Netherlands implemented a fully operational alert system in 2008 and recently Germany also launched an Amber Alarm. Other countries, like Belgium, Ireland and the Czech republic are on the verge of creating a Child Alert system.

With support of the European Commission – Directorate-General Justice, the Belgian foundation “Child Focus” aims at creating a Belgian Child Alert system (2010-2011). This system is mainly oriented towards extremely worrying child disappearances. The main objective of their project is to develop a technological up to date and flexible warning system enabling cross-border collaboration. The system is developed in close collaboration with relevant stakeholders. This project forms the background of this research report.

## **1.2. What is currently known?**

Research concerning child disappearances and the process of information dissemination is seemingly non-existent<sup>3</sup>. In the USA a group of scientists examined the effects of the US Amber Alert system ([www.amberalert.gov/index.htm](http://www.amberalert.gov/index.htm)). There is no research available that gives insight into the relation between the recovered youngster and the effects of an alert message. This is remarkable, since it is implicitly assumed that a child is ‘saved’ due to a public dissemination campaign.

*Griffin et al.* made a content analysis of 233 Amber Alerts that were broadcasted throughout America. The disseminated messages included parental abductions (50%), stranger abductions (30%) and runaways, lost or injured children and hoaxes<sup>4</sup> (20%). They discovered that (Griffin, Miller, Hoppe et al., 2007: 378):

- Authorities presume that alert messages contribute to discovering abducted children, although there are not any study results available that support this hypothesis.
- Alerts are rarely used in stereotypical disappearance cases (i.e. abductions by strangers).
- Amber Alerts show positive effects in files concerning parental abductions and have less satisfying results when it involves stranger abductions.

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<sup>3</sup> Search terms uses: (child) disappearances, missing children, (child) abductions, runaways and information dissemination, Amber Alert/Child Alert. The key words were formulated in Dutch, English, French and German. Since the number of hits was low broader key words were implemented, under which news making, criminology, (risk) communication, communication flow and moral panics.

<sup>4</sup> False messages.

- The time between the discovery of an abduction and the decision to launch an Amber Alert is mostly longer than the recommended duration of a few hours.

Theoretically a US Amber Alert can only be launched if it meets the criteria of the Department of Justice<sup>5</sup>. The research demonstrated that these guidelines weren't always applied as formally expected. This led towards an overload of alert messages, often poorly executed. In the case of abductions, the researchers observed an 'Amber fatigue' (Griffin, Miller, Hoppe et al., 2007: 378) and presume that, because of the overload, citizens are not enough focussed on alert messages. The researchers also question the motivation to launch an Amber Alert in case of a stranger abduction as an alert message could frighten the perpetrator by which s/he could harm the victim.

*Miller et al.* (2009: 113) studied the effectiveness of Amber Alerts on the ability of citizens to respond. An alert message is considered effective when people pay attention to it, remember the content of the disseminated information and are able to retrieve the memorized data. *Lampinen et al.* (2009: 412-415) found that although people define child disappearances as important social problems they seldom pay attention towards alert posters.

### 1.3. Aims of the research

During the period 2010-2011, with support of the European Commission – Directorate-General Justice, the Belgian NGO "Child Focus", responsible for disseminating information of child disappearances, works in cooperation with public stakeholders on the creation of a Belgian Child Alert system. This report presents the findings of a six-month explorative research (February-August 2010)<sup>6</sup>.

The Criminology Department of the University of Brussels compared Child Focus' current dissemination process with five European Child Alert systems. The analysis aims at describing the experiences with these systems and aims at drawing lessons that could be considered in the design of the Belgian Child Alert system. The research uses a context-sensitive analysis, taking into account the local conditions, rules, regulations and stakeholders involved.

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<sup>5</sup> These criteria are:

- There is reasonable belief by law enforcement that an abduction has occurred;
- The law enforcement agencies that the child is in imminent danger of serious bodily injury or death;
- There is enough descriptive information about the victim and the abduction for law enforcement to issue an Amber Alert to assist in the recovery of the child;
- The child is 17 years old or younger;
- The child's name and other critical data elements, including the Child Abduction flag, have been entered into the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) system (<http://www.amberalert.gov/guidelines.htm>).

<sup>6</sup> The last data collection was done in June 2010. Some valuable feedback was given by national correspondents in August 2010. But as the European Child Alert systems develop continuously, the reader has to take into account that information can be already outdated.

## **1.4. Structure of the report**

The first chapter discusses the research methodology. The second chapter describes the current way of working of Child Focus. It discusses the organizational structure, the target group, collaboration strategies with external partners and the procedure of information dissemination. Chapter 3 makes a descriptive comparison of different communication models from a selection of EU member states. Chapter 5 discusses some of the key observations from the international comparison. Chapter 6 presents some recommendations.



## 2. Research methodology

The overall research question of this report is: **'Which options can be considered in launching a cross border Child Alert system?'**. The objective of this research is to describe:

- The process of information dissemination concerning child disappearances in Belgium focusing on the communication trajectory of the Belgian NGO "Child Focus".
- The procedure of existing Child Alert systems in a selected sample of EU member states.

The research is a 'comparative analysis' aiming at an assessment of the strengths and respective risks of each approach. A detailed analysis (a 'plan-evaluation') of Child Focus' approach will be compared to five EU member states: France, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Greece and Germany. We intended to add the Czech Republic but at the time of the research the consortium agreed to exclude it as the system was not operational. Pioneering European countries that implemented an alert system are included in the selection (France, Greece, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom). The selection also took account of neighbouring countries since collaboration between border territories is not uncommon (France, Germany and the Netherlands).

Each dissemination model is described analytically using the following dimensions:

- The organization responsible for disseminating information.
- The target group(s).
- The partnership(s) of organizations involved.
- Description of the information dissemination trajectory (start – process of information dissemination – end).

Multiple data sources were used:

- Document analyses: information coming from Child Focus and other European NGO's.
- Semi structured individual interviews (Appendix 1) with members of Child Focus and external partners:
  - Child Focus
  - The chief operating officer
  - The coordinator of the service 'Operations'

- The Chief Communication Officer
  - The manager of the cell 'Network'
  - A respondent of the Missing Persons Unit (Federal Police)
  - A respondent of the Wanted Notices Unit (Federal Police)
- 
- Focus groups with the consultants and reception workers of Child Focus.
  - Short questionnaires (Appendix 2) on four elementary questions from all the European respondents via mail or telephone.

### 3. Child Focus: National procedure of information dissemination

#### 3.1. Child Focus as an organization

##### 3.1.1. A brief history

“Child focus” is the formally ‘Foundation for Missing and Sexually Exploited Children’<sup>7</sup>. For different reasons, under which increasing the communication effectiveness, the title is abbreviated into ‘Child Focus’ ([www.childfocus.be](http://www.childfocus.be)).

The Genval Charter of 1997 is the key reference document for the creation of Child Focus. It was written by a group of parents whose children were kidnapped and/or murdered in the Dutroux-case<sup>8</sup>. The document is endorsed by the Prime Minister and the ‘King Baudouin Foundation’<sup>9</sup>. The Genval Charter contains ethical and methodological principles, committing the activities and purposes of Child Focus.

Before 1997 information gathering on child disappearances was exclusively a task of judicial authorities and the police. On the 24<sup>th</sup> of November 1997 the statutes of the organization were completed and the first Ministerial Guideline for the tracing of missing persons was created by the Minister of Justice (Child Focus Welcome Kit, October 2009). This document presents working methods and defines the part of each actor in the investigation.

Since 1997 the launching of public information campaigns (data distribution- and gathering) concerning worrying child disappearances happens in collaboration of public and private institutions. A regulation-protocol was presented in 1998 for the cooperation between Child Focus, the judicial authorities and the police concerning the tracing of missing children and sexual exploitation of youngsters (Child Focus Welcome Kit, October 2009). In 2002, the Ministerial Guideline was revised. Additional Protocols of 2007 and 2008 expanded collaboration towards the Federal Government Service of Foreign Affairs and the Federal Government Service of Justice for international child disappearances. The protocols describe a procedure for missing children from the Observation and Orientation Centres for refugees in Steenokkerzeel and Neder-Over-Heembeek.

In 2000 the foundations were laid for the European Federation for Missing and Sexually Exploited Children<sup>10</sup>. In 2001 the European Parliament launched the organization and the Council of the European Union approved a resolution acknowledging citizen-cooperation in tracing missing and sexually exploited children (Child Focus Welcome Kit, October 2009).

7 Statuts coordonnés au 11 septembre 2007 concernant la “Fondation pour Enfants Disparus et Sexuellement Exploités”.

8 *Ibid.*

9 An independent and pluralistic foundation that aims to contribute on an enduring manner to more justice, democracy and respect for diversity (<http://www.kbs-frb.be/>).

10 Since 2007 this federation is known as Missing Children Europe (MCE).

### 3.1.2. Mission statement

The mission statement of Child Focus regulates all activities and statutes<sup>11</sup>. The mission of the organization is to provide active support in the investigation of disappearances, abductions and/or sexual exploitation of children and they contribute in prevention strategies (Child Focus Welcome Kit, October 2009).

To realize these assignments Child Focus develops **several activities** at a national and international level (Child Focus Welcome Kit, October 2009):

- Supporting and encouraging the investigation and legal measures.
- Ensuring follow-up in handled cases.
- Participation in the counselling of victims.

Every operation of Child Focus is constantly assessed and every employee is bound by professional secrecy<sup>12</sup>.

### 3.1.3. Statutes

Child Focus is an NGO, a “foundation of public utility” that is governed by a Board of Directors. This has an important impact on both strategic and operational decisions of Child Focus. The Board of Directors is authorized to conduct all acts that are necessary or useful for the organization. They represent the foundation in all judicial and non-judicial actions. The board can, within their qualifications, approve protocols, agreements and arrangements with public authorities<sup>13</sup>.

This board consist of 16 representatives of several interest groups. One of them is the chairman ([www.childfocus.be](http://www.childfocus.be)). All the members are chosen from<sup>14</sup>:

- The King Baudouin Foundation.
- The permanent committee of the Supervisory Council<sup>15</sup>.

---

11 Regulation-protocol for the cooperation between Child Focus, judicial authorities and the police concerning the tracing of missing children and sexual exploitation of children, 26/04/2007.

12 *Ibid.*

13 Statuts coordonnés au 11 septembre 2007 concernant la “Fondation pour Enfants Disparus et Sexuellement Exploités”.

14 Statuts coordonnés au 11 septembre 2007 concernant la “Fondation pour Enfants Disparus et Sexuellement Exploités”.

15 The Supervisory Council is an association composed of parents and close family members of children, who were murdered, went missing or were sexually exploited and of organizational representatives involved with these matters. All the members signed the Genva-charter. This means that they must accept certain methodological and ethical principles. The council can present propositions to the Board of Directors on the improvement of Child Focus.

- Institutional organizations dealing with child disappearance cases and sexual exploitation. These organizations are organised or acknowledged by the Flemish and Walloon communities.
- Personalities with standing who represent an organization of common utility.
- Personalities with standing who represent civil society.
- Anyone that can contribute to the objectives of Child Focus.

Child Focus can accept finances, donations, profits from tombola's, legacies and subsidies from public and private institutions. In general, there are three sources of financial aid (Annual report Child Focus 2008):

- Public subsidies (federal and regional).
- Donations from private organizations.
- Donations from the main public.

Next to that, the organization created merchandising-products to be sold to the public. Child Focus can also set up events, actions, ... with a specific aim.

### **3.1.4. Tasks and organizational structure**

Child Focus collects data coming from incoming calls, launches public information releases and provides support to the victims and their families (Annual report Child Focus 2008). Child Focus can start preventive (before a disappearance takes place) and actual files (a missing case).

Appendix 3 gives an overview of the overall organizational structure of Child Focus. It's out of the scope of this research to explore all entities. We focus on two divisions that play a vital role in the process of public information, namely the division 'Operations' and the division 'Communication'.

#### **3.1.4.1. Division 'Operations'**

The division 'Operations' handles every individual case-file concerning child disappearances and sexually exploited youngsters (Child Focus Welcome Kit, October 2009). This part of the rapport only focuses on the first category. The section 'Operations' has several employees:

- Chief Operating Officer, who manages the division.
- Senior Operating Officer, who coordinates the division.
- Assistant.
- Reception-workers: they are responsible for the technical intake (public contact function).
- Consultants: they are the responsible case managers for each individual call.

Child Focus is obliged to inform the judicial authorities and the police of incoming calls concerning information about disappearance cases. The data must be accurate, i.e. without conclusions or interpretations (Child Focus, interview, February 25<sup>th</sup> 2010; Missing Persons Unit, interview, 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2010).

#### **3.1.4.2. Division 'Communication'**

The division 'communications' regulates contacts between Child Focus and journalists (Child Focus Welcome Kit, October 2009). This division organizes campaigns, ensures follow-up of events and prepares the publications of Child Focus. They organize media conferences, disseminate press releases and give answers to journalists.

The department 'Communications' can choose to go to international, national or regional media. The decision to involve the media is not easily made. Advantages and disadvantages are always weighed. Information release by the press to the public is only possible with the consent of the magistrate, the police and the parents of the missing child. The wellbeing of the minor is a core criterion in taking the decision to involve the press.

The cell 'network' is part of the division 'Communication' ([www.childfocus.be](http://www.childfocus.be)) and coordinates the involvement of volunteers and structured partners in cases of worrying child disappearances. Regional media-campaigns or events can be helpful to attract volunteers.

## **3.2. Target Group**

### **3.2.1. Definition of the concept 'child'**

In general, all participants involved in disappearance cases apply the legal definition of the Belgian civil code that discerns two groups of age minority, namely everybody younger than 18 years and anyone who falls under the regulation of extended minority (Belgian Civil Code, art. 487bis).

However, in practice Child Focus also releases information about missing persons aged between 18-24 years. In this case the organization can only intervene on demand of the

parents, relatives or judicial authorities<sup>16</sup> and only when there is no evidence that the person left out of free will. The missing individual must live with and/or be financially depending of those people who exercise parental authority over him during childhood. All intervention strategies stop if, during a later phase of the investigation, the organization discovers that the person stepped out on his own free will. Finally, Child Focus can disseminate information about adults involved in a missing case file except for information about abductors or criminal circumstances related to the disappearance<sup>17</sup>.

### 3.2.2. Child disappearances

The Ministerial Guideline defines a disappearance as ‘every case wherein a person is absent from his/her nearby environment, this is in complete contradiction with his/her normal behaviour, the present residence is unknown and when it’s in the interest of the disappeared person that s/he is found as quickly as possible<sup>18</sup>’.

Missing youngsters can be subdivided into five categories<sup>19</sup>. These categories have implications for the procedure of information dissemination and collaboration with external partners (Child Focus Welcome Kit, October 2009; Annual guides Child Focus 2008 and 2007):

- Runaways: children who leave their (foster) family, guardians or the institution on basis of free will. Most of the cases that Child Focus handles belong to this category (figure 1).
- (International) parental abductions: the parent/guardian takes the child without legal authorisation of the other parent/guardian. It mostly involves cases where the decision of the judge concerning the right of access is not accepted.
- Abductions by third parties: when a familiar or unfamiliar person takes the child without the consent of the youngster or his parent(s)/guardian(s). It mostly involves kidnappings where the abductor is:
  - Legally denied of his rights as a parent/guardian.
  - A family member without parental rights.
  - A stranger.

In a minority of situations the abductor has criminal intentions.

16 Regulation-protocol for the cooperation between Child Focus, judicial authorities and the police concerning the tracing of missing children and sexual exploitation of children, 26/04/2007.

17 *Ibid.*

18 The definition is applicable for minors and adults. Ministerial guideline for the tracing of missing persons (adjustment of 20/04/2003).

19 Ministerial guideline for the tracing of missing persons (adjustment of 20/04/2003).

- Unaccompanied foreign minors that disappear after arrival in Belgium: minors originating from a country outside the European Economic Space (European Union, Norway, Iceland and Lichtenstein) who arrive in Belgium or live here without being accompanied by a person who exercises parental authority over them. This type is subdivided into three categories<sup>20</sup>:
  - Asylum seekers:
    - Youngsters who never arrive in the reception centre.
    - Minors who leave the reception centre within 48 hours.
    - Youngsters who stayed a long time in the reception centre or with a foster family and disappeared.
    - Minors whose request for asylum is declared inaccessible.
  - Non-asylum seekers: they often disappear from institutions where they were placed via a juvenile court magistrate.
  - Victims of human trafficking.

Files concerning unaccompanied foreign minors often lack of information about the identity and background of the minor. Therefore a proper case management is needed.

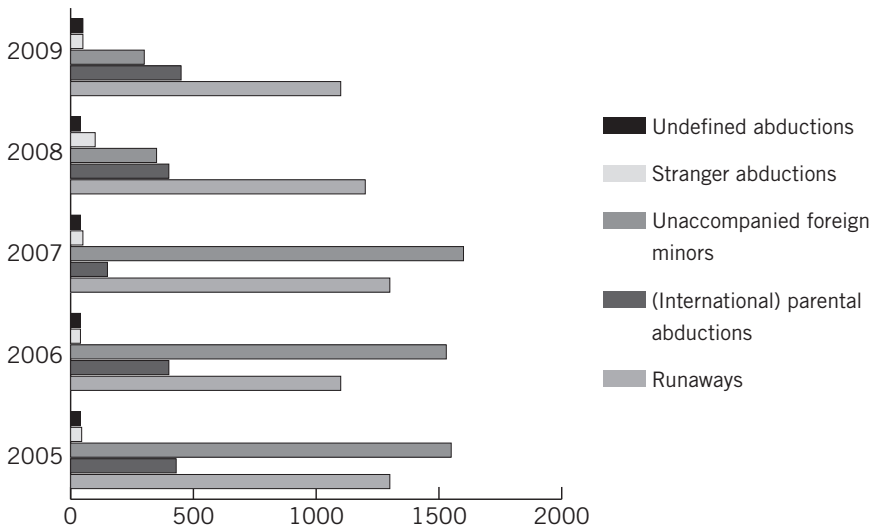
- Undefined disappearances: when there's insufficient information concerning the nature of the disappearance. These cases can always be redefined and categorised. When a file was based on a misunderstanding, when a child was involved in a deadly accident or got lost, the case will be classified as 'undefined'.

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<sup>20</sup> Ministerial guideline for the tracing of missing persons (adjustment of 20/04/2003).



Figure 1 gives an overview of the disappearance files Child Focus handled during the period 2005-2009 (Annual report Child Focus 2009).



**Figure 1: Overview of the disappearance files Child Focus handled during the period 2005-2009** (Annual report Child Focus 2009)

During the period of 2005-2007 the organization dealt with a large amount of files concerning unaccompanied foreign minors. In 2008 working practices changed. Before 2008 reports were made of every unaccompanied foreign minor, even if his/her identity was unknown. Since 2008 a file is only made if the identity is known and minimum information concerning the disappearance is available. The number of files regarding international parental abductions is stable during the period of 2005-2009. A lot of these reports still contain cases from previous years. Undefined disappearances and stranger abductions are least present throughout the period of 2005-2009.

### 3.2.3. Degree of seriousness

Child Focus implements the categorisation of the 'Ministerial Guideline for the tracing of missing persons' to assess the seriousness of a disappearance case. This document states that a disappearance is considered alarming when the child or adolescent is<sup>21</sup>:

- Younger than 13 years old.
- Physically or mentally handicapped or lacks the necessary ability to take care for him/herself.

<sup>21</sup> Ministerial guideline for the tracing of missing persons (adjustment of 20/04/2003).

- Dependent on medication or medical treatment.
- Could be in a situation that is life threatening for him or her.
- Could be accompanied by third parties who could threaten his/her wellbeing or s/he could be a victim of a crime.
- Absent and this is in complete contradiction to his/her normal behaviour.

Child Focus adds another category:

- A disappearance is always considered serious if a child or adolescent has not returned after a period of thirty days (Child Focus, interviews, February 25<sup>th</sup> 2010).

Moreover, Child Focus states that this list is not limitative. Every case is considered as unique. Each disappearance has to be evaluated taking contextual information into account. Child Focus supports the idea that all case-elements must be examined before decisions are made.

Guidelines to define a disappearance as extremely worrying are non-existent. However, in practice some categories can be distinguished (Child Focus, interviews, February 25<sup>th</sup> 2010):

- If the disappearance is related to criminal circumstances.
- When the youngster is in a life-threatening situation.
- If the missing child is very young.

The difference between a worrying and extremely worrying disappearance is made in relation to contextual circumstances: story of the parents or family, witnesses, certain findings (for example a bloody shoe of the missing child), undefined situation... Consultants of Child Focus state that experience of all partners plays a vital role in the definition.

Table 1 summarizes which disappearances are considered (extremely) worrying.

	Less worrying	Worrying
<b>Runaways</b>	If the minor ran away before, when the youngster is older than 13 years old...	I.e. the criteria of Ministerial Guidelines.
<b>Parental abductions</b>	When the investigators know where the minor is...	I.e. Ministerial Guidelines.
<b>Abductions by third parties</b>		Mostly worrying.
<b>Unaccompanied foreign minors</b>	If the identity is unknown. In this stadium the employees of Child Focus can't give much assistance. If more information is available the degree of seriousness will be revised.	If Child Focus knows the identity of the missing person, when there's enough information available and when the file has elements that are comparable to the characteristics that are summed in the Ministerial Guideline.
<b>Undefined disappearances</b>		Mostly worrying because of the unclear character of the situation.

**Table 1: Classification of the degree of seriousness**

Runaway cases, parental abductions and unaccompanied foreign minors are seldom communicated to the public.

- In cases of runaway and unaccompanied foreign minors, one wants to avoid that a youngster gets scared when s/he suddenly sees his/her photo on a poster or on television. They are usually searched with the help of vignettes (= small posters with a picture and information of the missing child). Moreover, the identity of unaccompanied minors is often unknown and the circumstances of a disappearance are often difficult and hard. For the latter cases Child Focus has a commitment with the Missing Persons Unit (Federal Police): if the identity and the circumstances of the disappearance are unknown it does not handle those files.
- Mediation is, according to Child Focus and the structural partners, more appropriate in the case of parental abductions.

### 3.2.4. Geographical working-area

Campaigns can be launched on local, regional, national or international level. The place of disappearance has an effect on the decision to launch a public disappearance message (Child Focus, interviews, February 25<sup>th</sup> 2010)<sup>22</sup>.

<sup>22</sup> Regulation-protocol for the cooperation between Child Focus, judicial authorities and the police concerning the tracing of missing children and sexual exploitation of children, 26/04/2007.

- Missing cases can require local attention. If, for example, a child disappeared in Antwerp and the file does not contain elements to assume that the minor has left the city, Child Focus will contact its networks within this region.
- A public information campaign can be launched on a regional level. If, for example a youngster is missing in Antwerp and investigational findings indicate that the minor is last seen in Brussels, Child Focus can extend the geographical working-area to that city.
- *National* disappearances require the involvement of more volunteers and structural partners. Child Focus only launches a public information campaign on this level if the whereabouts of the minor are uncertain.
- *International* disappearances are a matter of the Federal Public Service of Foreign Affairs, the Federal Public Service of Justice, judicial authorities and the police. Child Focus is less active as a partner since an investigation on this level depends on international collaborations and networks with the partners in these countries. Child Focus has a network of contacts within the international media (European and non-European). The foundation can involve them when the parents and the qualified authorities give their consent.

Disappearances with an International character can be subdivided into two categories:

- The child is located in a foreign country<sup>23</sup>. Usually international cases concern Belgian minors who disappeared abroad. A consultant of Child Focus deals with the matter as the foundation is authorised to mobilize a network of foreign NGO's specialised in missing case files (European and non-European). Only in consultation with the magistrate, the qualified institutions and the parents, contacts are made with cross border foundations or organizations to inform them about the disappearance.
- A foreign child is located in Belgium<sup>24</sup>. When the Federal prosecutor and the Missing Persons Unit of the Federal Police give their consent, Child Focus can disseminate a public information campaign if necessary <sup>25</sup>.

Sometimes foreign people call Child Focus even though they have no link with Belgium. In this case the foundation can only refer to the appropriate (foreign) organization.

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23 In case of an international disappearance other police services can be involved.

24 Ministerial guideline for the tracing of missing persons (adjustment of 20/04/2003).

25 *Ibid.*

### **3.3. Cooperation between Child Focus and external partners in the search for missing children**

Child Focus as an NGO mainly works together with judicial authorities and local and Federal Police services (public services) often regulated by means of protocols (see supra).

#### **3.3.1. Judicial authorities**

##### **3.3.1.1. Public prosecutor (judicial district level)**

The Public prosecutor is responsible, has full leadership and authority over each case for the investigation concerning child disappearances (Belgian Penal Code, art. 28bis§1). S/He is the central organ within the justice system that watches over a correct usage of criminal law procedures (Van Den Wijngaert, 2006: 563).

The moment the prosecutor on duty is informed about the disappearance case s/he will supervise the first investigation-procedures and dissemination process concerning the inquiry. S/He notifies the reference magistrate specializing in child disappearances who is in charge of the missing case. In case of a (extremely) worrying disappearance Child Focus will be informed. Considering the core tasks, the foundation can be contacted in case of 'less' alarming missing files too although this depends on the need of the family to be informed about the investigation<sup>26</sup>.

The Public prosecutor decides, in accordance with the reference magistrate specializing in child disappearances and the 'onderzoeksrechter' (an 'investigating judge'), whether or not an inquiry notice about a child disappearance should be launched. The Missing Persons Unit (Federal Police), Child Focus and the parents of the missing person will be involved in this decision.

##### **3.3.1.2. Federal prosecutor**

The Federal prosecutor has a comparable role to the Public prosecutor but on a federal level. S/He coordinates the criminal prosecution. S/He also fulfils an important role concerning international child disappearances (Van Den Wijngaert, 2006: 569-571).

#### **3.3.2. Local police**

Since 1998, the Belgian police organization is structured on two levels, namely a federal force and local police services.

Child Focus can only be involved in a child disappearance case when a local police service made a file. Anyone that contacts Child Focus about a possible disappearance will be advised to notify the local police as the first contact partner in the investigation. If there is

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<sup>26</sup> Ministerial guideline for the tracing of missing persons (adjustment of 20/04/2003).

suspicion of seriousness of a disappearance, the Missing Persons Unit (Federal Police) will be contacted. The magistrate has the last say in the determination<sup>27</sup>.

Parental abductions and runaways usually stay within the authorization of local police services unless it involves a worrying disappearance or a file with an international character. Child Focus can be contacted if the parents desire so. In this matter they collaborate in the local investigation wherein they keep all partners informed and/or start a local vignette campaign.

### **3.3.3. Judicial Federal Police**

The Judicial Federal Police is a specialized police service of the integrated Belgian police, which is structured on two levels. Its activities are aimed at tracing criminal phenomena, reporting to qualified authorities<sup>28</sup>, prevention, conducting (preliminary) investigations and fighting against criminal organizations (Federal Judicial Police, [www.fedpol.be](http://www.fedpol.be)). Child Focus often cooperates with two particular services of the Federal Judicial Police, namely the Missing Persons Unit and the Wanted Notices Unit.

#### **3.3.3.1. Missing Persons Unit**

Every police service confronted with a worrying missing case file must contact the Missing Persons Unit (a specialized investigating unit for disappearance cases) on its own initiative or on demand of the magistrate. The unit can also be contacted (a) if the nature or approach of the missing case is unclear and advice is needed, (b) when certain means are required that local police services do not have or (c) when information is requested concerning the approach of the child disappearance<sup>29</sup>.

Child Focus often works together with the Missing Persons Unit in case of a worrying child disappearance.

#### **3.3.3.2. Wanted Notices Unit**

The Wanted Notices Unit is a unit of the Federal Police that releases inquiry notices concerning missing adults, suspects, missing objects... (Wanted Notices Unit, interviews, March 9<sup>th</sup> 2010).

### **3.3.4. Interpol**

In case of international child disappearances Interpol can contribute in the investigation. The aim of the organization is the dissemination of information concerning international inquiry notices (Van Den Wijngaert, 2006: 560).

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27 Ministerial guideline for the tracing of missing persons (adjustment of 20/04/2003).

28 At district level: the public prosecutor and the examining magistrates. At federal level: the public prosecutors department.

29 Ministerial guideline for the tracing of missing persons (adjustment of 20/04/2003).

### 3.4. Coordination meeting

In case of a worrying child disappearance, all partners<sup>30</sup> involved meet, discuss and make investigational decisions<sup>31</sup>. They evaluate the situation, decide on the investigation strategy (priorities, needs and nature of means), determine rules concerning coordination and working-methods of the search, decide on regulations regarding information-exchange, divide tasks between all services and appoint a police coordinator who watches over the execution of the arranged measures. Is a poster distribution necessary? If so, on which places is this necessary? Must the media be informed? All these questions are handled within the meeting. After this, evaluation moments will take place so everyone has insight into the needs and evolution of the investigation.

### 3.5. Procedure of information dissemination

This section is analytically organized conform to the stages and events potentially occurring in a trajectory of information dissemination on a child disappearance. The flow chart is presented in appendix 6.

#### 3.5.1. Start dissemination process

The division 'Operations' is the first within Child Focus to be notified of a missing child. In short, the start phase of the process contains three events: an incoming call, the opening of a case file and the decision whether or not to launch a public inquiry.

##### 3.5.1.1. Incoming call

The most common manner to contact Child Focus is the national and international emergency line 116 000<sup>32</sup>. Other ways of contacting Child Focus are: the internet (e-mail), post-correspondence, a fax-message and a personal visit. The organization uses the same procedure for all these methods.

The 116000 telephone number is available at any time (twenty-four hours; seven days a week). There'll always be someone to answer the incoming call. Between 7h00 A.M. - 23h00 P.M. this 'someone' is a reception-worker and after 23h00 P.M. the calls are answered by Eurocross, one of the alarm centres of the Belgian health insurance funds (Child Focus Welcome Kit, October 2009). Their staff is trained to handle incoming reports.

A computer makes an electronic registration every time someone dials the 116 000 number, even if the caller hangs up the phone. The emergency line has an electronic

30 The prosecutor (district level), the 'onderzoeksrechter/juge d'instruction' (if involved), investigating police officers, the Wanted Notices Unit (if it is necessary), Missing Persons Unit (if it is necessary) and Child Focus (unless the prosecutor judges it unnecessary).

31 Ministerial guideline for the tracing of missing persons (adjustment of 20/04/2003).

32 Also see chapter 4.4.2.4.

warning message, so every time someone dials it, the call gets on hold until a reception-worker (or Eurocross) picks-up the phone. The message informs the caller that his telephone number will be identified, Child Focus takes notes of every report and the conversation will be recorded<sup>33</sup>. If the person dialling in did not disconnect after hearing the warning, a reception-worker takes further steps. S/He makes a registration-form registering:

- Data of the caller.
- A summary of the message.

Category of the telephone-call:

- Intervention.
- Information.
- Testimony.

It's possible for the caller to keep his anonymity if he desires, but Child Focus always recommends giving references. If the caller decides to stay anonymous and the reception-worker believes the message is serious the information on the case will be given to the authorized magistrate anyway (upon request).

In general, anyone can contact Child Focus. The organization has different registration forms for: parents, guardians, juvenile institutions, children, witnesses, police officers, magistrates, lawyers, help-organizations and volunteers. The Missing Persons Unit (Federal Police) or a local police officer mostly contacts Child Focus in case of an extremely worrying child disappearance.

The reception-workers report data concerning child disappearances and sexual exploitation of youngsters. Child Focus handles calls concerning intervention strategies, information requests (general and specific) and testimonies. They do not handle malicious calls/hoaxes, wrong reports, irrelevant testimonies and other sorts of information.

A different intervention report is created according to the question whether (Child Focus Welcome Kit, October 2009):

- The child has just disappeared.
- The child has disappeared for a long(er) period.

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<sup>33</sup> Law concerning the protection of privacy.



The organization can only take further steps when the police is notified and parents or guardians of the missing minor give their consent. If the police has not reported the disappearance, Child Focus will advise the parents or guardians to contact the police. The reception workers transfer all case-reports to the consultants who are responsible for the daily management and follow up of each child disappearance file.

### **3.5.1.2.** Creation and follow up of a case file

The consultants closely analyze each disappearance file ([www.childfocus.be](http://www.childfocus.be)). They also give support to parents and/or victims, listen to their stories and try to create confidence.

Consultants try to stimulate the qualified authorities and the investigators during the search within the first hours after the incoming call. They keep in touch with all partners involved in the investigation, participate in coordination meetings and inform everyone.

If a consultant receives the file of the reception-worker s/he will examine if the police organization gathers information of the status of the file and calls the authorized officer to verify if he received the correct information and if the file has not been solved yet. The local police service and/or Child Focus contact the Missing Persons Unit (Federal Police) in case of a worrying disappearance. If so, all partners come together in a coordination meeting to check the given information and discuss about the possible necessity of a public dissemination campaign.

In case of an extremely worrying child disappearance a reception-worker or the Missing Persons Unit (Federal Police) immediately contacts the consultant. The latter contacts the “back up”, i.e. the coordinator or chief operator of the service ‘Operations’ who coordinates the entire process. S/He has several responsibilities in order to act on a short notice: sending the Child Mobile to the place where the disappearance occurred; contacting the division ‘Networking’ and reporting that a local/regional/national poster campaign is necessary; contacting the division ‘Communication’ if needed; gathering everyone whose presence is required and sending them to the local police service; keeping everybody posted... Every employee involved in the process must contact the back up so S/He can coordinate the event.

### **3.5.1.3.** Decision national/international public dissemination

In general, all child disappearances come into account for a possible information dissemination campaign. But not every (extremely) worrying child disappearance is put in the public sphere (see also supra). Child Focus applies certain formal and informal criteria though in the decision-making process to disseminate information (Child Focus, interviews, February 25<sup>th</sup> 2010). Decisions concerning a public release of information are always made with close consideration of the Juvenile Protection Law and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

*Less worrying child disappearances* do not qualify for an information dissemination procedure. It's not uncommon though that in a later phase of the police investigation the seriousness of the missing case increases, inducing a decision to develop an information strategy anyway.

Launching a public information campaign concerning worrying disappearances depends on multiple factors:

- The parent(s)/guardian(s), the authorized magistrate and the involved police service must give their consent. Especially the judicial authorities (Public prosecutor and/or examining magistrate) have a definitive and final say in the process. Nevertheless, moments of reflection and consultation are part of the decision-making process aiming at mutual agreement between all partners involved as much as possible.
- The decision to release information depends on an assessment whether this would help the missing child:
  - A thorough analysis of the disappearance case is necessary. The consultants within Child Focus have to closely examine the file of a missing child.
  - Pro's and con's of a possible dissemination process are listed by all partners. The focus lays on ethical considerations, investigation-necessities, the context of the disappearance ...
  - Releasing information to the public should not jeopardise the police-search:
    - There must be sufficient information available regarding the missing child and the circumstances in which s/he disappeared. If the disseminated message is too vague or incorrect it can:
      - \* stimulate false statements.
      - \* create an overload of public reports and thus dominate police-capacity.
      - \* decrease public statements.
    - The content of the disseminated message should avoid stigmatising (e.g. when the youngster is a prostitute). Otherwise it can de-motivate people to report.
    - The released information should avoid public anxiety. The disseminated message should therefore be specific
- In case of *extremely worrying child disappearances* Child Focus almost always has the approval and motivation to launch a public information campaign unless it will or can undermine the investigation.

A variety of characteristics determine the decision of launching a national or international information campaign (Child Focus, interviews, February 25<sup>th</sup> 2010).

- *The nature of the disappearance* case influences the dissemination process, as well as the personal *context of the child*.

- Time is an important issue. Sometimes there's an urgent need for information, in other situations it's better to wait.
- Child Focus cannot launch a campaign if the qualified authorities (the police and the Public prosecutor) are not involved. The victims' parent(s) or guardian(s) have also to give his/their consent. All these characteristics are connected to each other. For example, the variable 'timeframe' often depends on the context of a disappearance case.

If parents want to contact the media, even though all structural partners are against it, Child Focus will advise them to reconsider their decision (Child Focus, interviews, February 25<sup>th</sup> 2010).

### **3.5.2. Process of public information dissemination**

#### **3.5.2.1. Collecting and preparing information**

After this decision is taken to launch the child alert, a consultant immediately goes to the necessary location to collect information (person description, photograph...) to prepare posters or television/radio/press spots. Within two hours the first 1000 posters can be printed on the spot and distributed by all persons concerned (family, parents...). The poster can be sent via internet to Child Focus where a larger production will take place.

Child Focus can send the "*child mobile*" (intervention vehicle), but this depends on the location where the youngster went missing. In any case, the driver must first go to Child Focus before s/he can go to the place of disappearance. Since the drive can take a serious amount of time it can be more effective that the driver prepares the posters at home (s/he has material provided by Child Focus) and sends the package to the foundation via a courier service where a consultant takes the posters to the necessary location. Another option is that the organization prints the required posters at the office momentarily. All depends on the time-factor: the fastest and efficient way prevails (Child Focus, interviews, February 25<sup>th</sup> 2010).

#### **3.5.2.2. Follow up**

A consultant visits the parents of the missing child to give support and information about the case. S/He tries to create a bond with them and keeps in touch with the investigators. This bonding process with the parents and the investigators generally improves the information flux between both parties.

When the child is found the consultant gives the necessary support to the child and the parents. S/He also gives information about certain (social) organizations they can visit (for example: the Urgent Social Intervention division of the Red Cross).

When the child is not found the consultant keeps in touch with everyone (parents – investigators – magistrates – social services). On a regular basis all the partners come together to investigate if the case-information is still correct and up-to-date.

It's not uncommon that a public information release is withdrawn (Child Focus, interviews, February 25<sup>th</sup> 2010). When a child is found before the data-dissemination campaign, Child Focus (cell Operations and Communication) informs all partners involved that the distribution of posters is not necessary. The media, if they were alerted, also receives a message that a public press release is not longer needed. If the information dissemination was already launched Child Focus will try to end the process as quickly as possible.

### **3.5.2.3. Dissemination channels**

The network division can distribute more posters to volunteers and structural partners via a courier service. Child Focus contacts the coordinators of the judicial districts so that volunteers will be ready and take care of practical arrangements. Every distributor must mark the place where they paste a poster. If the foundation receives testimonies from witnesses they will be directly faxed to the police (Missing Persons Unit (Federal Police) and the local police) as well as to the magistrate. In case of an urgent testimony Child Focus calls the police in advance and reports the content of the message. Sometimes there's an overload of information available and in such cases coordination is difficult. The police must examine every report, which can imply serious work overload.

#### **The protocol – agreement with partners**

The protocol agreement is a formal agreement with structural partners, i.e. institutions or organizations that have a large potential in distributing posters and/or vignettes ([www.childfocus.be](http://www.childfocus.be)). The National Lottery as well as the public transport agencies (NMBS, MIVB and TEC) are important partners, because they can distribute digital posters to a lot of places: stores, supermarkets (Lottery), trains (NMBS), metro's, buses and trams (MIVB, TEC)... Vignettes can also be distributed to employees. Telecom-operator Proximus is another important partner since people with a WAP mobile phone can get up-to-date with disappearance cases disseminated by Child Focus ([www.childfocus.be](http://www.childfocus.be)). The 'Operations'- unit is responsible for maintaining contacts.

Child Focus can also count on the assistance of stewards, prevention workers, security workers ... (Annual report Child Focus 2008). A lot of other partners distribute posters and vignettes in the search for missing children.

#### **The network of volunteers**

The network model is formed via an informal agreement with voluntary partners. In this procedure, the 'Operations'- unit also is the responsible service for the safeguarding of these contacts. Child Focus developed units of volunteers in 27 districts of Belgium to coordinate

the distribution of posters and vignettes. Permanent guidance is necessary because volunteers could be unavailable at some point. Every trimester a meeting takes place with Child Focus where coordinators gather together in order to form and inform the effectiveness of poster- and vignette campaigns ([www.childfocus.be](http://www.childfocus.be)). Coordinators and volunteers are also available on special events where they try to promote Child Focus to the local public. On such occasions they can sell merchandising-products of the foundation ([www.childfocus.be](http://www.childfocus.be)).

## **The press**

When a larger (national) public has to be reached Child Focus will contact the media and keep them informed about the case during the period of the disappearance. The press model provides formal as well as informal agreements. Child Focus maintains these relations within the 'Communication'-unit. A public press release is possible after the consent of all contributing partners of the investigation after which the media is obliged to launch the information. This situation is the result of a formal agreement between Child Focus and the public broadcasting company, via the Wanted Notices Unit of the Federal Police. However, a public dissemination process is also possible via an informal agreement. This situation depends on the trust relation between Child Focus and the commercial broadcasting company.

### **3.5.2.4. Communication tools**

The choice of the tools depends largely on the dissemination channel.

## **Posters and vignettes**

The protocol partners and the volunteers are used to distribute posters (in paper or digital forms) and vignettes. Vignettes are small posters with a picture and information of the missing child and are distributed to specific groups like stores, taxi-drivers, hospitals, (community) policing- employees... This instrument can easily be used on a local basis, where posters demand public attention. They can be distributed on a local or national level ([www.childfocus.be](http://www.childfocus.be)).

## **Media messages**

The press model provides media attention. It's possible to launch a public information message via television, newspapers, radio and online-media<sup>34</sup>.

All disseminated notices appear on the website of Child Focus and the Federal Police. When an information campaign gets media attention the message will also be visible on the websites of the television agencies and the newspaper distributors in question.

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34 The website of the newspapers, RSS-flux, Inter-Press.

It's possible to launch four different types of messages on television:

- A short message.
- A message in a television-program.
- A message on teletext.
- A press release before or after a television-program.

The press can also be involved via “Inter-Press”, a communication instrument for journalists and information services if the involvement of international media is considered necessary ([www.childfocus.be](http://www.childfocus.be)).

### **Content of the message**

The following data will systematically be distributed:

- A photo of the missing child.
- A description enabling identification of the person.
- The date of the disappearance.
- The place of the disappearance.
- If necessary, other information that could help the case (for example a car description).
- If necessary, the reason why the case is worrying.

### **3.5.3. End of the dissemination process**

In general, the dissemination process stops when the case is closed.

Child Focus underlines that victims and their families should get the opportunity to cope with their feelings after a dissemination process. Safeguarding personal privacy must be respected at all times.

The judicial authorities decide when the dissemination process stops, after which all posters must carefully be removed. Normally every distributor marked the place where s/he pasted, however it occurs that a poster from a solved case is still visible after a period of time.

If considered useful, a public campaign can be re-launched for old cases every four years.

If a case remains unsolved all partners come together and discuss the necessity of an extended information launch. After a period of time Child Focus can restart the dissemination process. Once a year the Network division checks which cases remain unsolved.

Removing messages from media is difficult when a (solved) case gets much public attention. In extreme situations judicial authorities can request a press-stop in order to coordinate everything. In the latter case journalists are not allowed to publicize anything about the case unless they obtain permission from the Public prosecutor. Of course, in case of a press-stop Child Focus cannot launch media messages.

### **3.6. General appraisal**

The previous section mainly described the current working procedures, collaboration processes and criteria used to disseminate information. This section presents some interpretative commentaries helping to reflect further in the final chapter on “things to consider” when developing Child Alert systems. We focus on particular organization issues, the criteria used to define child disappearances and public information dissemination.

#### **3.6.1. Organizational characteristics and collaboration**

Although the effects of the Dutroux case were not the sole causes, they were one of the most decisive motivations to restructure administrative procedures in the 1990s in Belgium. Concerning the investigation of child disappearances, this implied changes on several levels:

- The reforms of the Belgian police. Since 1998 it is structured on two levels, namely a federal force and local services.
- The creation of a ‘Missing Persons Unit’ within the Federal Police.
- The creation of judicial guidelines concerning child disappearances.
- The rise of Child Focus, a private NGO that is founded by a group of parents whose children were kidnapped and murdered.
- The involvement of the media, structural partners and volunteers to disseminate information concerning child disappearances.
- The involvement of public assistance in the search for missing youngsters.

Cross border collaboration also enhanced, with the upcoming focus on European cooperation plans, the increasing possibilities to form alliances with foreign institutions and the upcoming usage of ICT.

The reforms introduced rather important changes in the policing process of child disappearance. The search for missing children is now executed by a mix of public and private (NGO's) organizations. Different cultural settings are brought together wherein a consensus has to be found or negotiated every actor of a certain organization (police, justice department...) represents values, norms, interests and visions of the institution.

The particular "history" of Child Focus as an NGO is relevant in this changed "policing field". The operational strategies of Child Focus are mainly inspired by social welfare rather than the judicial or the policing field of their partners. Their activities, such as providing support to families of missing children, giving information concerning the investigation, referring people to welfare workers and providing a 24h emergency hotline, are clear indications. Child focus initially relied much on networks with local cells of volunteers. Their primary objective was to create a citizen control structure to watch over the rights of children and support investigational proceedings by launching information campaigns concerning missing youngsters. Over time, other dissemination channels than volunteers have been structurally integrated on a learning-by-doing basis, certainly also inspired by international developments. The organization gradually professionalised, to a large extent because of its statutes as a formally recognized partner and because of structural funding, enabling to recruit more staff. Although the volunteering part remains a core part of the organization, working procedures with new partners are becoming more structuralized and professional staffs are now at the core of the organization. Child Focus is profiling itself as a non-governmental organization, capable of operating autonomously, away from commercial interests, but operates collaboratively with police and justice departments and primarily the general public. The foundation collaborates with official and private practitioners, which means that they work with partners with different values, norms, operating procedures and strategic interests.

One particular observation, also for developing future international collaboration is that action strategies on child disappearances are regulated both by protocols and negotiations. In each case a coordination meeting between all partners will take place in case of worrying child disappearances also in order to assess the situation, showing that protocols and rules are not a sufficient basis to act upon.

### **3.6.2. Child Disappearances**

With regard to the concept 'minority', two approaches come into practice: a formalized and a more informal approach. The judicial definition clearly states that a minor is anyone under eighteen years, unless s/he falls under the law of extended minority. The *social definition* is more complicated. Child Focus can handle disappearance cases up to the age of twenty-four when there is no evidence that the person left out of free will<sup>35</sup>. Age-determination can be a point of discussion amongst case consultants (Interviews Child Focus). Since people give social meaning towards minors, it is not surprising that

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35 There are examples of missing case files where the victim was even older.



the legal definition is seen as dissatisfying. It is clear that the social meaning given to the concept 'minority' evolves and differs from an unsatisfactory experienced legal definition that is too rough to be applied on each case.

In theory, the determination whether or not someone is 'disappeared' mostly depends on the conceptualisation outlined by the Ministerial Guideline. Examining this definition, five characterizing variables can be distinguished:

- The physical disappearance (the person is not in his regular environment).
- The element 'behaviour' (the disappearance is in complete contradiction to his/her normal behaviour).
- The 'unknown whereabouts' factor (the unknown place of residence at present time).
- The element 'uncertain wellbeing' (the possibility that the missing child could be in a situation where the circumstances are not beneficial for his wellbeing).
- The factor 'time' (the person must be found as quickly as possible).

Child Focus (among other collaboration partners too, such as the Missing Persons Unit (Federal Police)) value the uniqueness of each case-file very high. Putting this uniqueness central is not always easy to combine with more formal procedural approaches. Through the "learning by doing" process criteria are being used and developed with regard to child disappearances and implemented stepwise. Some of these criteria are precise, while others remain vague. During the interviews it was often stressed that each case requires a specific assessment: it is precisely the different values and norms used by organizations (supra) that lead to decisions on case files based on a negotiated process, rather than a procedure-based technocratic approach.

Experiences show that judging the actual disappearance of a minor is a difficult process because investigational procedures must handle a lot of uncertainties. Some disappearances are clearly viewed as being 'extremely worrying' (there is consensus concerning these files) while for others disagreement becomes apparent during the debates. Stranger kidnappings and undefined abductions are generally categorized as extremely worrying. Unaccompanied minors are only worrying if the identity of the missing child is known. Parental abductions and runaways are cases that can be a point of discussion. Interviewing all the participants involved in the search for missing youngsters indicates that the *uniqueness* and contextual elements of each file hardens the formulation of definite criteria. Mostly, a missing case file is considered extremely worrying if the disappearance is related to *criminal circumstances*, life-threatening situations and/or when the child is very young.

### 3.6.3. Communication tools

Some particular reflections could be made with regard to the issue of disseminating information to the general public. The fact that Child Focus is developing much along a “learning by doing” – process results in the observation that a systematic, methodological reflective and external assessment of the activities has not taken place yet. Child Focus is continuously reflecting on improving its working practices, but on an emerging basis and often as a reaction to emerging ad hoc problems. A critical and formal analysis of the effectiveness and efficiency of the organizational working methods has not been made yet. As a result very little formal attention is being paid to a proactive analysis concerning the pros and cons of communication tools in the creation of a Child Alert system.

In general, Child Focus disseminates information about a missing case file when external help is needed, i.e. when the investigators have no leads of the missing child and its in the child’s best interest to be found. The used communication channels- and instruments can be categorized as *covered communication tools*, *local communication tools* or *mass communication tools*. It is distinct that not every disappearance file requires public dissemination, e.g. when the information campaign could frighten the disappeared child or the abductor. In such cases it is preferable to make vignettes that will be handed over to professional agencies such as police officers, social workers, community services... in the area(s) where the child went missing. Vignettes can be defined as *covered communication tools* because they are used to involve more people in the search and keep the missing case out of public attention at the same time. If a disappearance file does need public attention the investigators have to decide to launch the public information campaign on a local level or to involve means of mass communication. A disappearance case can require local attention, e.g. when a child went missing in a delimited area and it’s necessary to involve the help of local citizens. In such cases Child Focus makes posters and contacts their formal and informal partners. If necessary, i.e. when the poster campaign does not reach enough citizens and statements stay of, the help of local media is required such as regional television, local newspapers (and their websites) and internet (distribution on local websites). All these instruments can be categorized as *local communication tools*. A disappearance case can also require national/international attention. In such cases *mass communication* tools are needed: national/international television, newspapers (and their websites) and internet (RSS-feed, messages on websites...). A Child Alert system is aimed at using such means and brings along several ethical difficulties (infra).

In short, sometimes a case needs to be distributed as quickly as possible, sometimes its better to wait and sometimes its better not to launch an information campaign at all. Much depends on the:

- Degree of seriousness: if the disappearance case is defined as extremely worrying and public assistance is needed for the investigation, Child Focus will immediately take action.

- Time frame of the disappearance: an intervention differs according to the question whether the child has just disappeared or the child has disappeared for a long(er) period. When a child just went missing and the investigators fear that the child's life might be in danger, Child Focus will intervene almost immediately. All partners involved in missing case files agree that a disappeared child must be located as quickly as possible.
- Area/place of disappearance: information dissemination is not necessary if the investigators know where the missing child is located. If a child went missing in a delimited area, a local information campaign is preferable. When the investigators have no leads they will most likely use means of mass communication.
- Availability and content of (useful) information regarding the missing child. Information dissemination is useless when there is no specific information available of the disappeared child. Child Focus will also not launch a public information campaign when there is reason to believe that its content might harm or frighten the child or his/hers abductor, create stigma's or enhance public anxiety/moral panics.

As mentioned, a Child Alert system aims at using mass communication tools to involve public assistance in the investigation. This choice leads to ethical considerations. Some proactive reflection on the impact could be useful. In the media messages are framed and transmitted to citizens who will decide whether or not to define situations as real social problems (Vasterman, Scholten & Ruigrok, 2008). So-called 'news waves' can originate by which a topic becomes important because it is treated as such (Vasterman 2005: 513-517). Once a child disappearance case gets public attention the media do not report solely about the object (i.e. the event) but also about subject(s) (i.e. perpetrator(s)/suspect(s), victim(s) and their families). Depending on the nature of the disappearance, the direct impact of the media can have reciprocal effects (Kepplinger & Glaab, 2007: 338) on the subjects the press reported about and thus leave an overwhelming impression on all actors involved.

The issue of child abuse and disappearances connects easily to the problem of "moral panic", as is demonstrated by many Belgian and foreign examples. Moral panic can evoke public outrage, although not all 'moral panics' do (Newburn, 2007: 95). People that maintain moral panics are the press, citizens, law enforcement, politicians, legislators and action groups (Staller, 2003: 331). Cohen defined a moral panic as a result of a condition, an episode or actions from persons that form a threat towards essential social values, which is presented in the media in a stylised manner (2002: 9). Thompson - influenced by Cohen's theories - distinguishes five characteristics in the trajectory of a moral panic (Thompson, 1998: 8):

- Something or someone is defined as a threat to values.
- This threat is represented in the media.
- Public concern is rapidly build-up.
- There is a reaction from the authorities and/or the public (opinion makers).
- The moral panic results in social changes.

Once a disappearance case receives public attention it can provoke labelling and stigmatising people, as people define what kind of behaviour they consider being 'right' or 'wrong' (Becker, 1963: 1-18). If, for example, a child went missing and his/her mother was drunk at the time, the public could define the disappearance as a result of bad parenting. The media can play an important role in people's perception of what is 'right' or 'wrong' as it constantly launches information and provides certain theories regarding social problems (Reiner, 2002, 394).

Cases of miscommunication, investigational flaws and false accusations create adverse news coverage that could enhance public response. Considering the symbolic meaning people give to youngsters it is not difficult to argue that media reports of child disappearances impact on public opinion and social changes. What appears is a *'crime control theatre'*, which covers *'a public response or a set of responses to crime that generate the appearance but not the fact of crime control'* (Griffin & Miller, 2008: 167).

Miscommunication and negative press reports can therefore have an effect on organizational structures, external contacts and relations with the media (De Cock, 1997: 139). For organizations involved in such delicate issues as information dissemination one would expect a systematic and broad risk management in the preparation of a project such as Child Alert, both on the level of the technological design as well as the societal impact. The use of technological means requires several judicial, ethical, economical and practical reflections in the preparation process. In crisis management for instance, the creation of an efficient communication plan and the enhancement of effective management strategies can enlarge opportunities for organizations to deal with negative press reports. A proactive approach would lead to a systematic analysis of criteria and issues that needs to be reflected upon. At this stage it seems that criteria are certainly used, but an overall in-depth societal reflection remains implicit.

## 4. Comparative analysis

### 4.1. Introduction

This part compares Child Focus' communication model with the Child Alert systems of five European countries: France, Greece, United Kingdom, the Netherlands and Greece. A general description of these Child Alert approaches can be found in appendix 4.

Although the general mission of involving the public in child disappearances seems to be shared, it is quite interesting to observe that practical rules and modalities diverge between states.

Because of the practical constraints of this research (6 months, one researcher) we did not make an in-depth study of all the individual countries which, consequently limits the comparison at the level of detail. But the descriptive comparative analysis learns important aspects to develop Child Alert systems on an international level. We will also refer to The *“Commission Staff Working Document: best practices for launching a cross-border child abduction alert”* of the European Commission. This working paper proposes key elements of child abduction alert mechanisms based on the experiences of several Member States. It aims to motivate countries to implement these key elements in order to enhance international collaboration and to improve working strategies regarding cross-border child disappearances.

First, it is interesting to observe that each of the selected countries have their particular historical development affecting the choices made on organizational configuration, partnership models, definition of area of activity, the use of procedures, and the choices of communication channels and tools.

Secondly, choices made in countries are to a large extent inspired by foreign examples. Most European alert systems are based upon the US model. Countries, like Greece, France, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands visited the National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) in Washington D.C. (USA), to collect information about the design and operational methods of the US Amber Alert.

### 4.2. Organizational configuration

#### 4.2.1. Types of organizations managing the alert system

The first European fully operational alert system in France, called 'Alerte Enlèvement' is coordinated by the Public prosecutor. In Greece the alert procedure is defined as 'Amber Alert Hellas'. The Greek Centre for Missing and Exploited Children, a department within the NGO 'The Smile of the Child', operates the system. The Missing Persons Bureau is part of the Crime Analyses Unit within the National Policing Improvement Agency, an advisory body that works alongside the police and related organizations.

They coordinate the UK ‘Child Rescue Alert’ system. In the Netherlands, the decision to launch an ‘Amber Alert’ lies within the authority of the police. Finally, the coordination of the German ‘Amber Alarm’ is arranged by the NGO ‘Initiative Vermisste Kinder’. Table 2 summarizes the state of the art of Child Alert systems in the selected countries.

Country	Alert System	Organization/Service	Nature of organization
<b>Belgium</b>	Under construction	Child Focus	NGO
<b>France</b>	Alerte Enlèvement	Directorate of Criminal Matters and Pardons	Minister of Justice
<b>Greece</b>	Amber Alert Hellas	Greek Centre for Missing and Sexually Exploited Children	NGO
<b>United Kingdom</b>	Child Rescue Alert	Missing Persons Bureau	Non-Departmental Public Body
<b>The Netherlands</b>	Amber Alert	Landelijk Bureau Vermiste Personen	Korps Landelijke Politiediensten (Police Service)
<b>Germany</b>	Amber Alarm	Initiative Vermisste Kinder	NGO

**Table 2: Organizations managing the Child Alert system**

#### 4.2.2. Cooperation with external partners

The actors collaborating in the alert process are comparable between countries, except for France. In general, police services, judicial authorities, media, (international) NGO’s, structural partners and volunteers all contribute to the investigation and/or procedure of information dissemination.

In France the Public prosecutor arranges the entire alert mechanism, in collaboration with the police and the media. Collaboration strategies with NGO’s only occur in cases where victim aid is required and technical proceedings are needed.

In Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium and Greece a private organization takes up the key role of public information dissemination.

Child Focus and the Greek centre collaborate with police services according to guidelines: once the qualified authorities decide an alert is necessary the NGO’s take over.

Initiative Vermisste Kinder is still working on an improvement of cooperation strategies with the qualified authorities. At present, Germany does not have operational collaboration guidelines. Although the private partner is of a different nature, the Dutch collaboration strategy is quite similar with the Belgian and Greek working method: the police decides whether or not an alert message is necessary and a communication company coordinates the dissemination process.

The United Kingdom uses a different method. The Missing Persons Bureau is an advisory body that works alongside the police and related organizations and collaborates by giving advice and providing coordination.

In every country, the media plays a key role in the dissemination process. The United Kingdom even created a protocol, since the media are seen as key players in launching the Child Rescue Alert to the general public.

All countries work with structural partners, like billboard companies, advertising companies, transport companies etc. Their collaboration is arranged via a formal agreement.

Belgium, Greece and Germany also work with volunteers. Their contribution mostly involves the distribution of posters and supporting campaigns.

#### **4.2.3. Summary appraisal**

Generally, initiatives were taken as a reaction to incidents regarding child disappearances, i.e. Child Focus, the Greek Centre and Initiative Vermisste Kinder. The developments indicate that children are seen as something 'sacred'. A violation can create transitional changes in society.

The social reaction towards the Dutroux-case in Belgium, for example, was the turning point for the reforms of the Belgian police structure (Enhus, 1998: 522-535), the creation of the Missing Persons Unit within the Federal Police (Script Missing Persons Unit of the Federal Police) and the creation of Child Focus (Annual Report Child Focus 2008). Similar events took place in other countries, e.g. in Greece, Germany...

These societal developments introduced a shift in the organizational modes of providing public services and policing models with regard to child disappearances. Several organizations within the public-private sphere (nationally and internationally) now work together in disappearance files of youngsters. This development induces the particular problem of inter-organizational and inter-professional collaboration. In all European countries partners with different values, norms, operating procedures and strategic interests have to collaborate. All the European organizations discussed in the report work together with external partners in the dissemination process. Developing collaboration strategies in this networking perspective is a continuous learning and negotiation process in which expectations of different partners have to be adapted to each other.

A key finding for all countries is that collaboration and finding agreements are not only matters of procedures and protocols. Collaboration has to be socially constructed: mutual trust, understanding and developing common meaning is considered as a key component. Many countries have developed “negotiation levels” in which issues can be discussed and negotiated. This seems of particular importance in developing Child Alert systems, as a child disappearance is not a “standardized” product: there are different types, and the personal context of the child and the disappearance can affect the choice to start a campaign or go public or not (see also paragraph 4.2).

A remarkable observation in the particular context of this report is that the design of the local systems did not explicitly consider the aspect of international cooperation strategies. Although the existence of a European hotline number is present and there are moments of knowledge-exchange between international organizations, specific alliance possibilities are not conceptualised with the respective designs.

### **4.3. Child disappearances: the underlying principles used**

#### **4.3.1. Children and youth**

European organizations mainly apply the legal definition of minors as a point of reference. In France, the United Kingdom, Greece and the Netherlands a minor is defined under the age of eighteen; in Germany this means anyone under the age of seventeen

But different countries allow in daily practice for a more flexible interpretation of this legal definition: all countries disseminate child disappearance cases that exceed the age of 18. Belgium even handles cases up to 24 years of age.

#### **4.3.2. Types of disappearances**

The selected countries categorise eligible child disappearances for a child alert under different labels (Table 3). Overall the distinction is made between runaways and abductions (stranger – parental). Belgium and Greece use a specific classification, wherein they recognize unaccompanied foreign minors as child disappearances. France implements a less detailed categorisation and distinguishes ‘runaways’ and ‘worrying disappearances’, whereas the United Kingdom only speaks of ‘abductions’ (parental – stranger). A different angle is put forward in the Netherlands: they focus on the degree of seriousness rather than the nature of the disappearance. Seriousness is an important criterion in other countries too.



Country	Types
<b>Belgium</b>	Runaways Parental abduction Abductions by third parties Unaccompanied foreign minors Undefined disappearances
<b>France</b>	Runaways Worrying disappearances
<b>Greece</b>	Stranger abductions Non-custodial parental abductions Runaways Child victims of trafficking or unaccompanied minors Lost, missing or otherwise injured children
<b>United Kingdom</b>	Parental abductions Abductions by other persons: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parental child abductions: kidnapping of a child by a parent or guardian</li> <li>• Stranger attempted children abductions: kidnappings by someone unknown to the child</li> <li>• Stranger successful child abductions: kidnappings by someone unknown to the child that succeeded</li> <li>• Other: successful and attempted abductions of a child by an individual that had previous relations with the child</li> </ul>
<b>The Netherlands</b>	High-risk cases: these files involve missing persons who are in a life threatening situation, are young and/or did not leave voluntarily Low-risk cases: these files involve missing persons who probably left voluntarily and are not likely to run serious risks Absconders
<b>Germany</b>	Runaways (from home or an institution) Inexplicable abductions Parental abductions Abductions from strangers International abductions

**Table 3: Types of disappearances**

### 4.3.3. Summary appraisal

Most countries implement art. 1 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child that defines a minor as anyone who is younger than eighteen years old, in designing the alert system. The main motivation is that a clear age-regulation reduces the risk of conflict situations during the decision-making process. However with regard to the concept of “minor” two approaches seem to emerge in practice in the different countries: a formal regulated one and a more pragmatic approach. The former approach relies on a *legal definition* stating that a minor is a person that is younger than eighteen years old, unless

S/He falls under the law of extended minority. The more *pragmatic approach* uses a mix of criteria applied on a case-by case basis.

This pragmatic approach is experienced as a difficult process by external partners of Child Focus (Child Focus, interviews external partners, 2010) as well as reported by the different countries (Questionnaires European respondents, April – May 2010). In contrast many recognize that a purely formal definition has its backdrops too: especially since the issue of vulnerable children or youngsters is not solely determined by age criteria, but also by their personal context and the type of disappearance.

#### 4.4. Process of information dissemination

For all the selected countries, the most important motivation in launching a Child Alert project is the notion that an abducted child most likely survives when s/he is found within the first hours after a kidnapping.

##### 4.4.1. Start process information dissemination

###### 4.4.1.1. Actors involved in the decision making process

All countries apply the same fundamental principle that the (local) police must make a report of the disappearance case before a public information campaign can start. Ultimately, the final decision is taken by the Public prosecutor (BE, FR) or the police (UK, NL, D). Greece is the only exception where the decision is made by the missing persons unit (Table 4).

DECISION TO LAUNCH AN ALERT	
Country	Responsible
Belgium	A coordination meeting with the Federal Police, judicial authorities and Child Focus. The Public prosecutor has the final say.
France	Public prosecutor
Greece	Missing Persons Unit
United Kingdom	The police: the SIO (Senior Investigating Officer), the gold commander on duty or an ACPO officer should ratify the call to launch.
The Netherlands	Korps Landelijke Politiediensten, Landelijk Bureau Vermiste Personen (police)
Germany	Local police

**Table 4: Decision to launch an alert**

#### 4.4.1.2. Criteria used in decision making

Deciding whether or not to launch a public information campaign is a process wherein different conditions and criteria are enlisted and considered (Table 5). Belgium uses the Ministerial Guideline for the tracing of missing persons; the other EU member states discussed in this report developed special guidelines stipulating the conditions for an alert. An international consensus is found about these criteria. If several of the conditions are present, authorities will launch an alert in the different countries. However in practice every country emphasizes other elements: e.g. Belgium can define a 'life-threatening situation' differently than the other countries.

<b>CONDITIONS IN WHICH A PUBLIC INFORMATION CAMPAIGN IS FAVOURABLE</b>
Unfavourable mental and/or physical condition of the child and/or medical dependency of the minor
Unknown whereabouts
Life threatening situation of the disappearance
Intentions abductor will most likely harm the child/Criminal circumstances of the disappearance
If a youngster is absent for a period that is longer than thirty days
Known circumstances of the disappearance
Availability of sufficient information (citizens need to know who is missing and where they need to look; information that is vague does not apply)
Reasons to assume that the public information campaign will obtain useful testimonies.
Police authorities must decide that public information release does not harm the well being of the child
Specifically in case of a runaway file: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Age of the disappeared minor (younger than 13 years). The younger the child the more serious the nature of the disappearance</li> <li>• The act of the child is in complete contradiction to its normal behaviour</li> </ul>
Date of the missing child must be included in the National Schengen Information System as soon as possible together with the request for the tracing and repatriation of the minor

**Table 5: Guidelines used in the decision-making process**

#### 4.4.1.3. Degree of seriousness

Comparable but not identical criteria are used in the different countries to assess a disappearance as (extremely) worrying (table 5). In principle, every disappearance applies for public information dissemination except for unaccompanied foreign minors. France only launches an alert message when the disappearance involves a kidnapping. Belgium, the Netherlands and Greece rely on a more negotiated assessment in valuing the degree of seriousness. Germany and the United Kingdom only take parental abductions and stranger abductions into account.

		NATURE OF DISAPPEARANCE				
		Runaways	Parental Abductions	Stranger Abductions	Unaccompanied Foreign Minors	Other
COUNTRY	Belgium	Depends on criteria	Depends on criteria	Yes	No	Depends on criteria
	France	No	No	Yes	No	No
	Greece	Depends on criteria	Depends on criteria	Yes	No	Depends on criteria
	United Kingdom	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
	The Netherlands	Depends on criteria	Depends on criteria	Yes	No	Depends on criteria
	Germany	No	Yes	Yes	No	No

**Table 6: Nature of disappearance**

#### 4.4.1.4. Summary appraisal

Most countries experience difficulties to solely rely on “formal rules” in general to assess the necessity to launch a campaign. Learning experiences in most European organizations urge to consider to what extent other than formal criteria are applicable as well. US research suggests that a balance between strict guidelines on one hand and a flexible usage on the other is necessary to decide on launching alerts. The same research also warns for a so-called ‘Amber fatigue’ where citizens are not enough focussed because there has been an overload of alert messages, often poorly executed (Griffin, Miller, Hoppe et al., 2007: 378).

Moreover, launching a Child Alert requires handling in a short notice, which means that decisions must be made quickly. The formal decision has to be followed by a range of activities in the dissemination process (collecting information, presenting information adapted to the different tools, transmitting incoming reports to the authorized institutions, contact external partners...). This particular quick reaction issue, especially if international collaboration is expected, requires further reflection negotiation and discussion, especially since individual countries experience similar problems but develop local practices, which could hamper international collaboration (developing trust and common meanings).

## 4.4.2. Process of information dissemination

### 4.4.2.1. Actors involved in coordinating the dissemination process

The person who decides to launch an alert is not always the same as the person who manages the system. Differences appear between European countries (table 7).

COUNTRY	MANAGING PROCESS OF INFORMATION DISSEMINATION
Belgium	Child Focus: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Division operations</li> <li>• Division communication</li> </ul>
France	Public prosecutor
Greece	The Greek Centre
United Kingdom	The police Missing Persons Bureau
The Netherlands	Private organization 'Netpresenter'
Germany	Initiative Vermisste Kinder (NGO)

**Table 7: Actors involved in coordinating the dissemination process**

### 4.4.2.2. Dissemination channels and tools

Differences occur between countries in the way to use dissemination channels and tools (table 8). Information concerning the missing minor can only be launched if the investigators are convinced that its content will not harm the child's life. This guideline is applicable in every country.

Every country uses different media. Belgium, Greece, France and the Netherlands also use posters (mostly digital). The Netherlands, Greece and Germany, use an online registering system allowing citizens to receive information via SMS or mail if a child is missing.

In general, an alert message gets public attention for a short period of time. France for example launches an alert every 15 minutes during 3 hours; the United Kingdom every 15 minutes during 4 hours; Greece every 20 minutes during 48 hours. The Netherlands disseminate only one alert message for as long as the child remains disappeared with maximum dissemination duration of 24h. The Netherlands only re-launch an alert if there is a significant change or addition to the original message. Belgium and Germany do not apply a specific timeframe wherein an alert message gets distributed.

		DISSEMINATION CHANNELS AND TOOLS				
		Media (TV, press...)	Structural partners (NGO's, railway stations...)	Volunteers	Online Registration system	Other
<b>COUNTRY</b>	<b>Belgium</b>	Television Radio Newspapers Internet Online media	Posters (digital and paper) Vignettes Internet	Posters (digital and paper) Vignettes Internet		
	<b>France</b>	Television Radio	Digital posters			
	<b>Greece</b>	Television Radio Internet Online media	Posters (digital and paper) Flyers Message boards	Posters (digital and paper) Flyers	SMS	
	<b>United Kingdom</b>	Television				
	<b>The Netherlands</b>	Television Online media Internet	Posters (digital and paper)	Optional: citizens can print posters (digital and paper) from the Dutch website www. vermiste kinderen.nl	Computer (e-mail, RSS-feed,...) SMS	
	<b>Germany</b>			Digital posters	SMS	Fax

**Table 8: Dissemination channels****4.4.2.3. Content of the disseminated message**

There is an overall consensus that the content of the alert message should be short and effective. It should literally 'alert' people.

The amount of information and the content of information depend on the dissemination instrument. A balance of content and speed of information is always made: a message on TV can hold more information than an SMS, while an SMS can alert citizens more quickly.

The content of the message is comparable between the countries: a picture of the child, the name of the child, a brief description, place and time of disappearance, and

some other information that could help the case. In France the alert message can only include the first name of the missing child. Moreover, any alert message must include the warning: *“Do not intervene yourself but please call the emergency number”*. In the United Kingdom information is added concerning the offender if the identity of the abductor is certain.

#### **4.4.2.4. Using the number 116 000**

116 000 is a free of charge European hotline number that is reserved for hotlines for missing children by the European Commission. The number is accessible to all citizens and provides information, assistance and reporting possibilities. It gives access to local organizations specialized with national/international child disappearances through which parents of missing children receive necessary support ([www.hotline116000.eu/116000.html](http://www.hotline116000.eu/116000.html)). The 116 000 telephone number is created with the intention of enhancing accessibility towards organizations which have obtained expertise in disappearance files. A hotline number that is easy to remember across Europe would fasten search procedures and provide immediate action from local authorities. The cross-border nature of disappearance cases, the need for immediate intervention and the demand to communicate beyond national borders stimulated the creation of the hotline (Annual Report Missing Children Europe 2007).

116 000 is operational in thirteen countries namely Belgium, France, the United Kingdom, Denmark, Spain, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia and the Netherlands ([www.hotline116000.eu/116000.html](http://www.hotline116000.eu/116000.html)). In case of launching an alert message, it is unclear how and which countries implement the 116 000 in their working methods. The number is used by NGO's and not by police forces. Most countries underline the importance of cross border collaboration and thus mention the hotline number on their posters, media messages... All countries also use national emergency numbers.

#### **4.4.2.5. Withdrawal of information**

The descriptive comparison learns that in all countries very little attention is given to the end of the dissemination process/withdrawal of the information from the public domain. In all countries a missing child is considered to be in danger until information proves otherwise. There is a general consensus that information should be withdrawn afterwards. In general, the guidelines for the removal of alert messages are limited to the indication that information must be withdrawn from public attention after a period of time or when the child has been located. However, it lacks detail on how this procedure really works. In Belgium, volunteers and structural partners must mark the spot where they distributed a poster. But no precise information is given on how this is managed. Similar remarks account for withdrawing media messages. No clear information is provided on how messages and information will be withdrawn or handled in the media. The descriptive analysis leaves a lot of questions open. We only have insight into the person that decides whether or not the dissemination process should end (table 8).

DECISION END DISSEMINATION	
Country	Who?
Belgium	Public prosecutor
France	Public prosecutor
Greece	The Police
United Kingdom	The Police
The Netherlands	The Police
Germany	The Police

**Table 9: Decision to end the dissemination process**

#### 4.4.2.6. Summary appraisal

The underlying assumptions in the design of Child Alert systems in all countries support the notion that the involvement of citizens in the search for missing youngsters is beneficial for the investigation. Most of this is based on anecdotal evidence. However, from a research and policy support point of view, little is known on the extent that different ‘public information dissemination’ strategies and approaches are effective (leading to actual results) or efficient, and this compared to alternative strategies. It would be worth to further examine the effectiveness and efficiency questions in order to optimize the country specific and international Child Alert models. This analysis would require a detailed analysis of the different components of the Child Alert system.

The impact of information made public via different media or tools could enhance social indignation and/or feelings of anxiety. This aspect is out of the scope of this research as it brings along several methodological problems. But the question would certainly fit in further in-depth reflections on the design of Child Alert systems. Past events indicate that the impact of certain child disappearances on the general public can be massive. Moral panics, conditions that threaten societal values and interests, can create a wave of public response and/or anxiety by which official reactions can be out of proportion to the events (Cohen, 2002: 201) and wherein the press, citizens, law enforcement, legislators and action groups all interact in reaction to the destabilized discourse (Staller, 2003: 330-331).

We obtained very little information on the risk analysis and management with regard to dissemination and use of tools. The impression is that aspects of risk assessment and risk management of these systems are rather implicit and ad hoc. Further insight would e.g. be needed in how organizations protect themselves in case of miscommunication or when media correspond negatively about their proceedings or on how it would affect the credibility and legitimacy of institutions involved in the investigation.



Each tool or medium raises its potential problems: using information and communication technologies raises particular problems, which have not been explicitly discussed (or at least very little data have been collected) in the different countries. Several technologies exist that help different users and exchange electronic data with one another, but clear and understandable rules for collecting, using, disseminating, and retaining the vast stores of data are lacking or the issue is seldom thoroughly discussed.

One particular example is the issue of putting information on the internet. The internet offers a global open and very accessible communication platform with an incredible ability to alert people on short notice. People can be informed via e-mail, websites, twitter, RSS-feed... Controlling information on this information platform can be difficult, e.g. once a website is made, people can forget to maintain it. As a result search-information concerning solved disappearance cases can still be visible for the general public, opening the issue of privacy of the child/youngster and its peers. It would be worth to develop a more in-depth reflection on the withdrawal and management of information regarding disappearances after a case is closed. For instance, we obtained very little detailed information on the technological design of an alert system. In all countries studied it is clear that different partners are involved in the overall decision-making process and the public dissemination of information. As a consequence it is clear that different users can be identified in the use of the system. It is however unclear at this stage how precise the roles of users are taken into account in the design of a system.

A related issue is the question of the flexibility of the technological software design. This issue is of particular importance for the future adaptability of the system, and especially relevant in the context of international collaboration. Country specific issues of interoperability (not only technological) should be taken into account in the design. In all countries different services that probably use different “logics” and software standards, should be able to be connected in one way or another. Most of the countries are now solely focussed on designing systems adapted to local requirements.

Some risk concerns could be uttered too with regard to the collaboration with media, especially since the media play a very different role in different European countries. Journalists can participate in the investigation by alerting the public of a missing youngster (media coverage *during* the search) and the press can report about the retrieved child (media coverage *after* the search). But little attention is currently paid to the public impact of these mass media information strategies.

A remaining issue is the 116 000 number. It is unclear how and which countries implement the 116 000 number on their alert messages. When countries implement the 116 000 number on their alert messages they also use national emergency numbers. Question is how citizens will know which number to dial. If an alert message needs to be effective, than the call instructions should be clear as well. It is also unclear if the alert message signals the number of the police, the NGO, or both...

## **5. Options to consider for designing a Child Alert system**

Taking into account the limitations of the current research, this part is limited to general, rather than punctual or operational recommendations.

### **5.1. Define aims and scope of Child Alert systems**

It is necessary to develop a clear plan of the overall scope of a Child Alert system. This implies being explicit on aims, scope and intended working procedures, beforehand. This requires a thorough preparation examining all dimensions related to a Child Alert system.

A Child Alert system is an integrated approach implying collaboration and negotiations with different partners along the whole trajectory of dissemination.

The development of a Child Alert system is an issue related to the public domain of policing and connected to public security feelings.

A Child Alert system is more than creating a mix of different dissemination channels to imply the public in the policing process. It is recommended to reflect clearly in the phase of the design to what extent a Child Alert system is:

- An additional tool to existing dissemination practices or merely an integration of dissemination tools currently used in child disappearances.
- Primarily intended for local/national practices or also for international coordination.

### **5.2. Collaboration between different types of partners**

A Child Alert system is not only a technological tool. It is part of a policing process, and consequently an issue of integrating working practices of multiple partners and professionals. Awareness has to be developed that different partner organizations with different missions, values, tasks and roles collaborate in the decision-making process of going public, which requires a systematic sharing and confronting of norms, values, preferences etc.

Technological designs do not resolve the issue of governance of partnerships. In partnership collaboration, such as a Child Alert system, more attention should be paid to the governance of inter-organizational collaboration, rather than relying solely on governance rules of individual organizations. Inter-partnership collaboration requires time and (human) resources in order to build trust.

Collaboration protocols are crucial, but not sufficient. Handling the dissemination of child disappearances cannot be reduced to an issue of procedures: negotiations and reflections are needed on a case-by-case basis.

Designing a Child Alert system requires a reflection in terms of a trajectory with phases and events. The role and contribution of partners can be different in the *respective stages of the dissemination trajectory*. It is useful to clarify roles and responsibilities of each in the different phases and be clear about lead partners.

More explicit attention and reflection is needed to the contribution and role of media in a Child Alert (the characteristics and role of the press and media are very different between countries).

Developing a Child Alert model explicitly involving journalists and other media representatives in the design of the Child Alert should be reflected upon in a more in-depth manner. Media protocols can be an asset to the project as they give insight into the various broadcasting possibilities and define the roles of several press employees in the alert process.

### **5.3. Foresee continuous support and training**

A Child Alert system is theoretically created for exceptional circumstances. A non-regular use implies that all the structural and voluntary partners must remain actively aware of all the steps and their responsibilities during the process. A training document as well as model for continuous support and training of all people involved on the working practices is to be considered as part of the Child Alert system.

### **5.4. Use of criteria**

A Child Alert system needs:

- To develop mechanisms to coordinate (implicit) criteria used on child disappearances by each individual partner.
- To balance:
  - distinctive features, allowing for a fast response and reducing procedural mistakes to a minimum,
  - flexibility to apply criteria on a case by case basis.
- To summarize criteria categorizing extremely worrying cases and criteria that comes into account for launching a Child Alert.

### **5.5. International Child Alert systems**

The “*Commission Staff Working Document: best practices for launching a cross-border child abduction alert*” of the European Commission draws up a set of key elements for child abduction alert mechanisms to enhance cross-border collaboration strategies. The intention is to set the common key principles for creating an international alert mechanism.

The working paper mainly focuses on cross-border cases, implicitly referring to border area's. However, in practice, the implementation of these key elements seems rather difficult, mainly because individual countries are still working in their "local" logics, as described before. The working paper can however be considered as a good stepping stone to promote the reflection and implementation of core issues in international collaboration. More attention is still needed on a planned and ex ante reflection on developing international Child Alert systems. Adapting ex post locally developed systems in an international perspective is sometimes more difficult (and often far less cost-effective) than vice versa. The development of an international approach should not rely on a "learning by doing" basis, as is the case in different national approaches: sufficient expertise and knowledge is now available to design a Child Alert approach in an international matter. The reflection should not only be theoretical, but should also be based on a clear assessment of current practices and collaboration models of different partners within the different countries. Bringing together the currently available knowledge and expertise should also be based on effectiveness en efficiency research rather than expert opinions. Collaboration frameworks should be more concrete, and flexible applicable agreements should be elaborated in order to allow for local (national) working practices too.

Particular issues regarding international collaboration are (age) definition of a child or adolescent, the elaboration of responsibilities within a nation/region and on an international level, and the different steps to be taken in an international collaborative approach.

## **5.6. Develop a mix of communication tools**

The use of a national and international common telephone contact number has to be streamlined; it currently lacks coherent communication on the use of public contact numbers.

Especially in an international context, more explicit debate is needed on the appropriateness of the use of dissemination channels and the form of the messages.

More attention should be paid on an ex ante evaluation of the technological design and maintenance of the (technological) tools. One can consider the following:

- Create a system that can be used locally, nationally and internationally.
- Create flexible and stable technological means that perform well under pressure.
- Define the authorisation procedure of access to, use and withdrawal of information from the system of respective partners (users).
- Take into account legal and ethical issues with regard to citizen privacy.
- Consider the future issue of maintenance of websites, and the dependency on external (private) partners in the stage of the design of the system.

Overall, more reflections are needed on the ending of a dissemination process and on withdrawing information on children and the peers from the public sphere.

## 5.7. Risk management

An ex ante reflection on the design of a Child Alert system requires risk assessment and management on different levels. Risk assessment consists in an objective evaluation of risk in which assumptions and uncertainties are clearly considered and presented. This analysis can lead to a risk management plan. In project management, risk assessment is an integral part of the risk management plan, studying the probability, the impact, and the effect of every known risk on the project, as well as the corrective action to take should that risk occur.

- Previous recommendation discussed the issue of technological design
- Assess the impact of financial and other resources on the possibilities and limitations to designing a Child Alert approach.
- Part of the risk assessment and management is to consider the impact of child alerts on public perceptions of security (especially with regard to children).

## 5.8. Follow up research of development and use of Child Alert systems

More evaluation research on effectiveness, efficiency and impact of the implementation of Child Alert systems could be relevant for the future design of these instruments.

An evaluation research agenda should focus on assessing the:

- effectiveness and efficiency of organizational procedures and resources of Child Alert systems;
- impact of Child Alert systems on policing processes on a national and international level;
- appropriateness and effect of the use of different dissemination channels: currently much of the design rules is based on non-validated assumptions;
- technological design of Child Alert systems, including the aspect of user research;
- impact of disseminated messages concerning child disappearances within the media. Consider the circumstances, benefits, risks and dangers of the reported press releases and media messages and assess the impact on public perceptions of safety;
- criteria used that are helpful in media coverage.

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[www.missingpeople.org.uk/](http://www.missingpeople.org.uk/), last consulted in April 2010

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[www.crimereduction.homeoffice.gov.uk/violence/violence12.htm](http://www.crimereduction.homeoffice.gov.uk/violence/violence12.htm), last consulted in April 2010

## 7. Appendixes

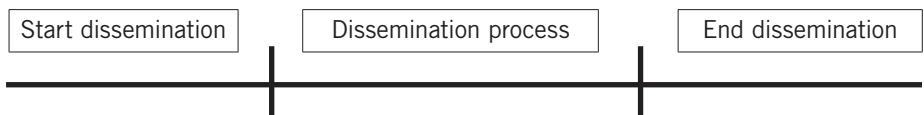
### APPENDIX 1: QUESTIONNAIRE INTERVIEWS CHILD FOCUS

#### 1. Aim of the interview

Gathering information concerning:

- Missing children
- The process of information dissemination

#### 2. Process of information dissemination



#### 3. Questionnaire

##### a. Start dissemination process

- Which disappearances does Child Focus report?
- Which disappearance cases does Child Focus handle?
- Is there a difference between extremely worrying disappearances, worrying disappearances and less worrying disappearances? If so, what are the differences?
- When do people report disappearances to Child Focus?
- Who can report a disappearance to Child Focus?
- How does Child Focus register incoming calls?

##### b. Dissemination process

- Which criteria come into account for a disappearance case to get launched?
- Who decides which disappearances can be launched?

- Which data of the disappearance case can be brought into public attention?
  - What information can be launched?
  - Are there certain protocols available that affect the decision?
- Which partners are involved in the dissemination process?
- Does the process of information dissemination happen according to a certain trajectory? If so, how does it pass?
  - Formal
  - Informal
- Which dissemination instruments can be used (television, posters, vignettes...)?
- Which choices stimulate the usage dissemination instruments?

### **c. End dissemination process**

- When does the dissemination process ends?
- When does a disappearance case end?
- Who makes the decisions?

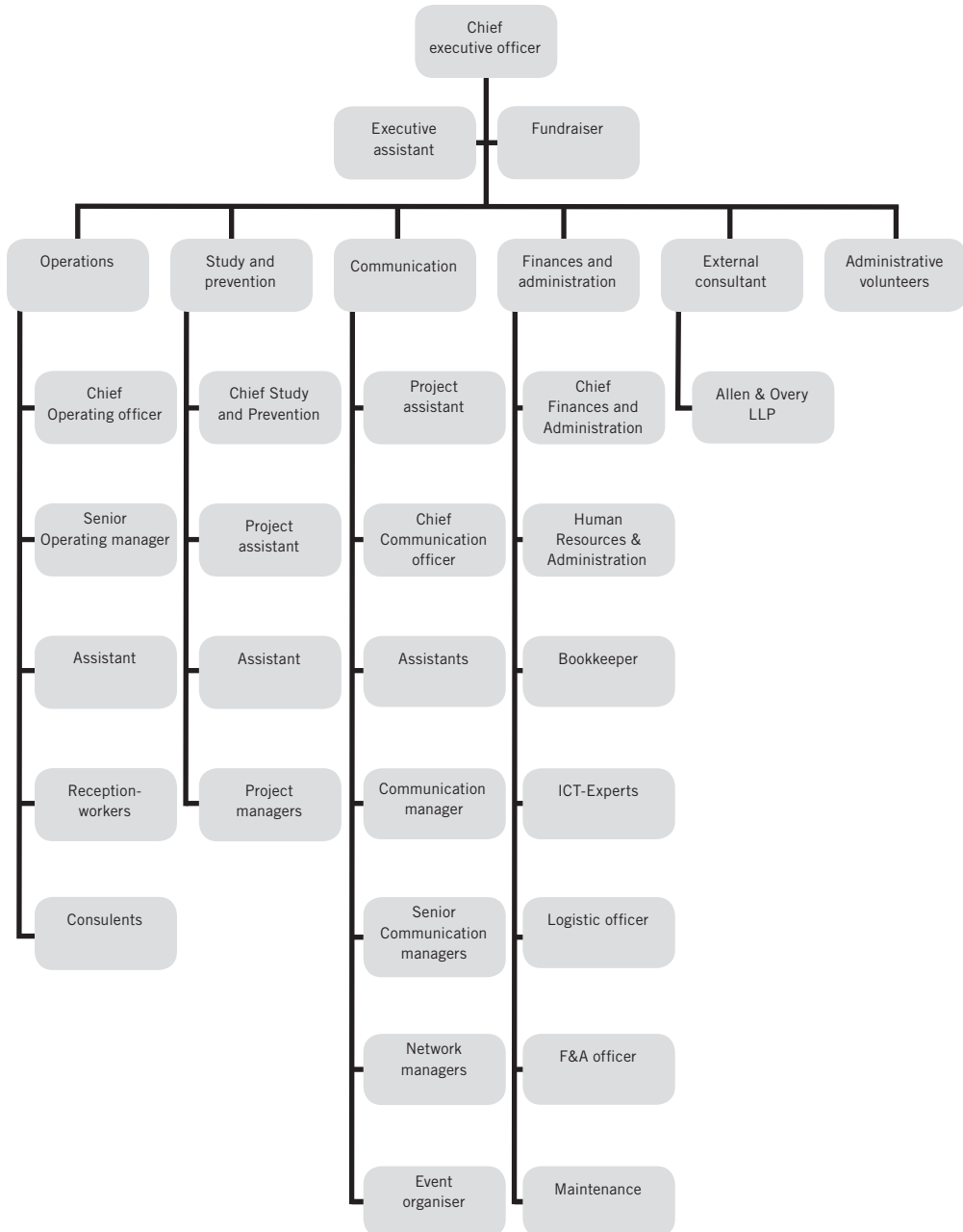
## **APPENDIX 2: SHORT QUESTIONNAIRE**

'Based upon your experience with the Child Alert system currently used in your country':

1. What are the strengths of the alert model?
2. What are weaknesses of the Child Alert?
3. What would you change about the system if you had to re-launch it all over again?
4. What would you keep about the project if you had to re-launch it all over again?



## APPENDIX 3: ORGANIZATION CHART CHILD FOCUS



**APPENDIX 4: MEMBERS OF MISSING CHILDREN EUROPE**

<b>OPERATIONAL MEMBERS</b>		
<b>Country</b>	<b>Organization</b>	<b>Mission</b>
<b>Belgium</b>	Child Focus	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Provide active support in the investigation of child disappearances, abductions or sexual exploitation of youngsters.</li> <li>2. Prevention and combat of child disappearances, abductions or sexual exploitation of youngsters.</li> </ol>
<b>Greece</b>	The Smile of the Child	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Provide help and support to children in danger and in need.</li> <li>2. Protection of children from all forms of exploitation and abuse.</li> <li>3. Provide shelter to children in need or danger under the Act of the District Attorney.</li> <li>4. Offer psychological and physical support to traumatized children.</li> </ol>
<b>Hungary</b>	Kék Vonal	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Providing a free telephone hotline for children and young people that deals with all kinds of problems raised by the callers.</li> <li>2. Listening, counselling, providing information, referring callers to specific institutions and intervening.</li> </ol>
<b>Italy</b>	Telefono Azzurro	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Protect children from any form of physical or psychological abuse.</li> <li>2. Defending their natural growth potential.</li> <li>3. Promoting respect for children.</li> </ol>
<b>Romania</b>	Focus Romania	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Prevent and intervene in cases of child disappearances (missing youngsters and kidnappings) and sexual exploitation.</li> <li>2. Provide active support and assistance to families, professionals and authorities involved in cases of child disappearances and sexual exploitation.</li> </ol>

<b>AFFILIATE MEMBERS</b>		
<b>Austria</b>	Rat auf Draht	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Provide a 24 hours toll-free hotline.</li> <li>2. Providing anonymous advice to young people seeking help via telephone-conversations.</li> </ol>
<b>Czech Republic</b>	Nadace Nase Dite	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Help children in life-crisis situations.</li> <li>2. Assert children's rights.</li> <li>3. Uphold the Convention on the Rights of the Child in the Czech Republic.</li> <li>4. Support all humanitarian projects that contribute to the creation of an effective child protection system in the country.</li> </ol>
<b>Denmark</b>	Thora Centre	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Provide help to people affected by sexual abuse regardless of gender or age. Thora Centre handles any type of sexual abuse and provides help for victims, perpetrators, or next of kin).</li> <li>2. Increase public awareness in order to prevent sexual abuse.</li> </ol>
<b>France</b>	Fondation pour l'Enfance  La Mouette  APEV	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Prevent neglect of children and cruelty to youngsters.</li> <li>2. Carry out initiatives and specific aid programs for professionals and parties working in the field of children and their families.</li> </ol> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Assure child deference.</li> <li>2. Protect youngsters.</li> <li>3. Help and support families and victims.</li> <li>4. Fights against paedophilia and child pornography.</li> </ol> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Advice and support families whose children are lost or murdered.</li> <li>2. Help families through legal proceedings.</li> </ol>
<b>Germany</b>	Initiative Vermisste Kinder	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Support parents and families whose children are missing.</li> <li>2. Accompany families and introducing appropriate measures.</li> <li>3. Initiate contact with German diplomatic missions in foreign countries and their local attorneys or family courts.</li> </ol>
<b>Ireland</b>	ISPCC	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Facilitate better child/parent relationships.</li> <li>2. Understand youngster's needs.</li> <li>3. Provide better possibilities to nurture children.</li> <li>4. Eliminate violence and abuse in families towards youngsters.</li> <li>5. Improve attitudes towards children.</li> </ol>

<b>AFFILIATE MEMBERS</b>		
<b>Italy</b>	Aurora	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Prevent and protect children involved in sexual exploitation.</li> <li>2. Prevent runaways, abductions and unexplained disappearances of minors.</li> <li>3. Promote education and awareness campaigns.</li> <li>4. Promote partnership-based approaches with police and local leaders.</li> <li>5. Enforce the International Convention on the Rights of the Child.</li> </ol>
<b>Poland</b>	Itaka	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Assist individuals who have gone missing or are in danger of going missing, and their families.</li> <li>2. Reduce the number of child disappearances.</li> <li>3. Improve efficiency in the search for missing persons.</li> </ol>
	Nobody's children	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Provide physical and psychological assistance to abused children, their parents and guardians.</li> <li>2. Provide therapeutic and educational help to victims and their guardians.</li> </ol>
<b>Portugal</b>	Child Support Institute	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Contribute to the full development of children.</li> <li>2. Defend and promote children's rights.</li> </ol>
<b>United Kingdom</b>	Missing people	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Support families of missing persons.</li> <li>2. Support in the search for missing persons.</li> </ol>
<b>Spain</b>	ANAR	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Promote and defend the rights of children at risk within the framework and provisions of the United Convention on the Rights of the Child.</li> <li>2. Provide the telephone hotline 'Teléfono ANAR' which is a helpline for children and adolescents.</li> </ol>
	Protegeles	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Combat all forms of child exploitation.</li> <li>2. Provide a telephone hotline.</li> <li>3. Provide a victim centre.</li> <li>4. Eliminate material of child pornography on the internet and identify those who are responsible for it.</li> <li>5. Generate social conscience about the problem of child pornography.</li> <li>6. Improve safety of children in the use of new online technologies.</li> <li>7. Collaborate in the search and rescue of missing persons, especially children.</li> </ol>

ASSOCIATE MEMBERS		
<b>Romania</b>	Save the Children Romania	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Fight for children's rights.</li> <li>2. Support children at risk.</li> <li>3. Influence public opinion, legislation and policies in the benefit for children.</li> <li>4. Recognize and underline responsibilities and duties of parents, guardians, teachers and other authorities for the well being of children.</li> <li>5. Support parents and specialists working in child welfare.</li> </ol>
<b>Germany</b>	Weisser Ring	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Assist crime-victims via emotional support.</li> <li>2. Assist crime-victims in dealing with authorities and court procedures.</li> <li>3. Provide financial support.</li> <li>4. Provide a nation-wide toll-free 24-hour emergency hotline.</li> </ol>
<b>Slovakia</b>	Linka detskej	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Prevent child disappearances and sexual exploitation.</li> <li>2. Train actions in finding missing youngsters and combat sexual exploitation.</li> <li>3. Provide research and educational campaigns.</li> <li>4. Provide counselling for victims of sexual exploitation.</li> <li>5. Provide a hotline.</li> </ol>

## APPENDIX 5: EU CHILD ALERT SYSTEMS

This appendix offers the more detailed descriptions of the countries used for a comparative description.

### 1. Selection criteria

This chapter discusses five countries that are currently working with a Child Alert system namely Greece, France, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and Germany. The experiences of Greece, France, the Netherlands, Germany and the United Kingdom with the public broadcasting mechanism are expected to bring general insights on convergences and divergences in the design of the Child Alert procedure.

Normally there was an agreement between all partners involved in the project to implement the communication strategy of the Czech Republic, but since their alert project wasn't effective during time of the research all stakeholders agreed to exclude their working procedure.

Interesting from a criminology point of view is that all these countries have a diverse social, economic, political and cultural background and history. It is known from social theories that policy frameworks and procedures are social constructed against the background of norms, values, preferences, interest of each individual system/society. It would be interesting to develop a better explanatory framework enabling to grasp the reasons why protocols and procedures are designed as they are: the way of comparing

would also allow to deduce lessons that could impact on the design of an international alert system. Because of practical limitation in the research our ambition on this latter question is limited but, where possible, indications will be given.

## 2. The European Commission

The European Commission adopted a Communication named 'Towards an EU strategy on the Rights of the Child'<sup>36</sup>. Its main aim is to establish a comprehensive EU strategy to promote and safeguard the rights of children in EU policies and to support efforts from Member States in this field. The goal of the Communication is to underpin existing legal structures and follow measures regarding violence against children, amongst which child disappearances. In light of this Communication, reflections have been made on how to create an alert system throughout Europe<sup>37</sup>, based on discussions from representatives of the police and/or judicial authorities from all the Member States. In Lisbon, in October 2007, the Justice Ministers agreed to set up an EU wide Child Alert system, but respecting the Member States' autonomy with regard to implementation ([ec.europa.eu/justice/policies/children/violence/policies\\_children\\_violence\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/justice/policies/children/violence/policies_children_violence_en.htm)).

## 3. Missing Children Europe

Missing Children Europe is an 'umbrella organization' as it gives support to twenty-four NGO's<sup>38</sup> that are active in sixteen member states of the European Union and Switzerland and contribute in the search for child disappearances and the battle against sexual exploitation (Appendix 4).

It was founded because of the growing observation and awareness that child disappearances should be discussed against the background of globalization. The European Parliament and the European Commission also underlined the need for an umbrella foundation that would represent voluntary associations that work on a national/regional level against child disappearances or sexual exploitation ([www.missingchildreneurope.eu](http://www.missingchildreneurope.eu)).

The mission of Missing Children Europe is fourfold ([www.missingchildreneurope.eu](http://www.missingchildreneurope.eu)):

- Ensuring that every EU member state meets with the basic requirements of dealing with missing and sexually exploited children.
- Stimulating transnational cooperation.
- Extending the level of the activities of its members to an operational level.

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36 This can be consulted on following website: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/Notice.do?checktexts=checkbox&checktext=checkbox&val=429534%3Acs&pos=3&page=1&lang=en&pgs=10&nbl=5&list=451546%3Acs%2C443422%3Acs%2C429534%3Acs%2C429635%3Acs%2C429634%3Acs%2C&hwords=Towards%2Ban%2BEU%2Bstrategy%2Bon%2Bthe%2BRights>.

37 More information can be found in the Commission Staff Working Document: best practices for launching a cross-border child abduction alert, Commission of the European Communities, Brussel 24/11/2008.

38 Non-governmental organizations.

- Assisting the member states in the achievement of a binding European legislation implementation.

The association tries to fulfil its missions by sharing best practices among its members, cooperate with the USA based International Centre for Missing & Exploited Children (ICMEC), represents their members at the European institutions and developing European tools in combating child disappearances and sexual exploitation of minors ([www.missingchildreneurope.eu](http://www.missingchildreneurope.eu)).

Missing Children Europe used to be financially supported by Child Focus but works on an independent basis since a few years. At present, they receive a budget from the European Commission via a “Daphne programme” (Annual Report Missing Children Europe 2008).

### **3.1. Members of Missing Children Europe**

The members of the organization can be subdivided into three categories (Annual Report Missing Children Europe 2008):

- Operational members

Only non-governmental organizations or private foundations that are recognized as being of public utility can be operational members of Missing Children Europe. All NGO’s must be active in the field of child disappearances and/or sexual exploitation of minors. None of the organizations can represent an international network of foundations. All NGO’s must have a co-operation agreement with their national public authorities (police and justice), have its registered office in a European country, have a call centre that is easily accessible, subscribe to the missions and purposes of the federation and oblige to the minimum criteria that are set up by the General Assembly in 2006.

- Affiliate members

Non-governmental organizations or private foundations that are recognized as being of public utility and are active in the field of child disappearances and/or sexual exploitation of minors can be affiliated members of Missing Children Europe. None of the organizations can represent an international network of foundations. They must have their registered office in a European country and subscribe to the missions and purposes of the federation.

- Associate members

Non-governmental organizations or foundations that are recognized as being of public utility and are active in the field of child disappearances and/or sexual exploitation of minors can be affiliated members of Missing Children Europe. They must have their registered office in Europe and subscribe to the missions and purposes of the federation.

The operational and affiliated members of the federation govern the foundation and meet at least once a year for a General Assembly (Annual Report Missing Children Europe 2008). They approve the organizations action plan and budget, vote in statutory changes or elect new members ([www.missingchildren.eu](http://www.missingchildren.eu)). The Board of Directors is composed of elected members and independent administrators. They have the ability to fulfil the goals of the federation and come together twice a year.

### **3.2. Emergency hotline 116 000**

Missing Children Europe is the driving force for the emergency line 116000.

116 000 is a free of charge European hotline number for missing children. The number is accessible to all citizens and provides information, assistance and reporting possibilities. It gives access to local organizations specialized with national/international child disappearances through which parents of missing children receive necessary support ([www.hotline116000.eu/116000.html](http://www.hotline116000.eu/116000.html)). The 116 000 telephone number is created with the intention of enhancing accessibility towards organizations which have obtained expertise in disappearance files. A hotline number that is easy to remember across Europe would fasten search procedures and provide immediate action from local authorities. The cross-border nature of disappearance cases, the need for immediate intervention and the demand to communicate beyond national borders stimulated the creation of the hotline (Annual Report Missing Children Europe 2007).

116 000 is operational in thirteen countries namely Belgium, France, the United Kingdom, Denmark, Spain, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia and the Netherlands ([www.hotline116000.eu/116000.html](http://www.hotline116000.eu/116000.html)).

## **4. Ministry of Justice – France**

France was the first country that created an alert system in Europe. Alerte Enlèvement is a public broadcasting system that is inspired by the American amber alert model after a visit of the French Minister of Justice to Canada in 2004. It is the first alert application developed within Europe.

The French Ministry of Justice and policy makers favour that all European member states develop a Child Alert system in order to *'fight against transnational abductions of minors and avoid child trafficking'* (documents Alerte Enlèvement).

France has developed a seemingly formalised procedure written down in a protocol<sup>39</sup>. The Ministry of Justice decides whether or not the public should be alarmed in case of an extremely worrying child disappearance (see also infra). The Judiciary is strongly involved to ensure that laws are complied with and individual rights are protected.

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<sup>39</sup> Convention "Alerte Enlèvement": plan d'alerte de la population en cas d'enlèvement d'un mineur, Ministère de la Justice République française, Paris, le 28 Février 2006.



The Directorate of Criminal Matters and Pardons, part of the French Minister of Justice is particularly relevant in the context of this research. It is responsible for criminal justice ([www.justice.gouv.fr/](http://www.justice.gouv.fr/)).

#### **4.1. Target group**

France categorizes two types of missing youngsters: runaways and worrying disappearances. The international Hague Convention of 1993 is the Legal framework for foreign parental abductions ([www.interpol.int/Public/Children/Missing/NationalLaws/mcFirstPage.asp](http://www.interpol.int/Public/Children/Missing/NationalLaws/mcFirstPage.asp)).

#### **4.2. Cooperation between the Ministry of Justice and external partners**

Several public partners (police, prosecutors, international organizations) as well as the media work together in locating missing children. Additionally, various private associations, such as “Fondation pour l'enfance”, contribute to the prevention of disappearance cases and the well being of youngsters and their families (documents Alerte Enlèvement).

#### **4.3. Alerte Enlèvement: procedure of information dissemination**

In 2005 an intergovernmental working group, including the Ministry of Justice, the National Gendarmerie and the National Police, was created in order to establish an alert project (documents Alerte Enlèvement). A year later several partners signed a convention<sup>40</sup> by which they engaged to participate in launching an Alerte Enlèvement when a child is abducted<sup>41</sup>.

The French convention urges to anticipate as quickly as possible once an abduction of a minor has been reported. References are made to an American study, which states that the first hours after a kidnapping are the most critical in returning the youngster home safely. The survival of the child is prior and since its life can depend on fast actions or adequate resources a system is created wherein exceptional measures can be used if necessary<sup>42</sup>. In short, Alerte Enlèvement is built on the following assumptions (documents Alerte Enlèvement):

- An alert system can put pressure on the kidnapper.
- A public broadcasting model can avoid abductions.
- The Child Alert mechanism is a new tool by which citizens are motivated to report information or testimonies and therefore it can help the investigation.
- Alerte Enlèvement must be limited to minors (< 18 years) in order to avoid exaggeration.

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<sup>40</sup> I.e. an agreement and not a new Law.

<sup>41</sup> Convention “Alerte Enlèvement”: plan d’alerte de la population en cas d’enlèvement d’un mineur, Ministère de la Justice République française, Paris, le 28 Février 2006.

<sup>42</sup> Art. Préliminaire, Convention “Alerte Enlèvement”: plan d’alerte de la population en cas d’enlèvement d’un mineur, Ministère de la Justice République française, Paris, le 28 Février 2006.

#### 4.3.1. Start of Alerte Enlèvement procedure

If a witness reports a kidnapping of a minor to the Gendarmerie or the National Police, he will be interrogated first in order to judge the seriousness of the testimony. The investigators will perform a local inquiry. In case of little result the police will contact the substitute prosecutor. S/he informs the Public prosecutor of the district where the abduction is notified, who will arrange a crisis meeting. In this meeting all investigators participate to decide whether or not an Alerte Enlèvement is justified (documents Alerte Enlèvement).

The Alerte Enlèvement convention sets out four binding criteria by which a public broadcasting system can start<sup>43</sup>:

- Not all child disappearances come into account<sup>44</sup>. The child must have been kidnapped recently.
- The physical integrity or the life of the victim is in danger.
- There are good reasons to assume that launching an alert can obtain testimonies from witnesses that can lead to the location of the missing youngster or to the perpetrator. Authorities must possess useful data (for example a description of the victim) that can be disseminated to the public.
- The victim is younger than eighteen years old.

If possible, the Public prosecutor should obtain the consent of the parents/guardians of the abducted youngster before an alert gets out<sup>45</sup>. If they refuse s/he can decide that it's in *'the interest of justice'* that the procedure gets started<sup>46</sup>. The Public prosecutor contacts in all cases the victim service to assist the parents/guardians if needed<sup>47</sup>.

French authorities underline the importance of all launching criteria simultaneously, given the exceptional measures when starting an alert mechanism<sup>48</sup>.

43 Art. 1 Convention "Alerte Enlèvement": plan d'alerte de la population en cas d'enlèvement d'un mineur, Ministère de la Justice République française, Paris, le 28 Février 2006.

44 Little information is available concerning parental abductions. The activity report of 2009 of the French NGO 'Fondation pour l'enfance' mentions that when a child is taken away by an family member for more than five days and the place of whereabouts is unknown the case is considered as worrying.

45 Art. 2, Convention "Alerte Enlèvement": plan d'alerte de la population en cas d'enlèvement d'un mineur, Ministère de la Justice République française, Paris, le 28 Février 2006.

46 Convention "Alerte Enlèvement": plan d'alerte de la population en cas d'enlèvement d'un mineur, Ministère de la Justice République Française, Paris, le 28 Février 2006.

47 *Ibid.*

48 Art. Préliminaire, Convention "Alerte Enlèvement": plan d'alerte de la population en cas d'enlèvement d'un mineur, Ministère de la Justice République française, Paris, le 28 Février 2006.

An ad hoc crisis cell, including judicial authorities and the police, will make a draft for the public broadcasting message<sup>49</sup>.

The Public prosecutor must notify the attaché of the General prosecutor from the Court of Appeal within the qualified jurisdiction who will contact the 'Direction des Affaires Criminelles et des Grâces' of the Ministry of Justice before the alert system can start<sup>50</sup>. In this division call operators gather all the information and testimonies coming from the broadcasted alert message ([www.alerte-enlevement.gouv.fr/index.php](http://www.alerte-enlevement.gouv.fr/index.php)).

#### 4.3.2. Procedure Alerte Enlèvement

The authorities in charge of the alert are (documents Alerte Enlèvement):

- The Public prosecutor. After the consultation of the General prosecutor and the Ministry of Justice s/he will decide whether or not to start an alert procedure<sup>51</sup>. The Public prosecutor remains the leading authority during the entire alert process.
- The French police forces (i.e. the National Gendarmerie or the National Police) are responsible for the investigation during the alert. They analyze all testimonies made by phone calls on the dedicated hotline and the ones by e-mail.

Although an alert mechanism requires exceptional actions from all partners involved, the methods used are part of typical investigational activities<sup>52</sup> such as appealing for witnesses, executing a broadcasting campaign, organizing a neighbourhood search, and in case of an international abduction information dissemination via Interpol and the Schengen Information System (SIS).

The Public prosecutor consults the investigators while setting up an alert message.

The message must be short, accurate and immediately noticeable to the public. According to the Ministry of Justice citizens have to know how to identify the child and the criminal by disseminating following data (documents Alerte Enlèvement):

- A physical description of the child and his/her first name. The surname will not be mentioned in the message.
- Day, hour and place of the abduction.

49 Art. 4, Convention "Alerte Enlèvement": plan d'alerte de la population en cas d'enlèvement d'un mineur, Ministère de la Justice République française, Paris, le 28 Février 2006.

50 Art. 4, Convention "Alerte Enlèvement": plan d'alerte de la population en cas d'enlèvement d'un mineur, Ministère de la Justice République française, Paris, le 28 Février 2006.

51 Art. 3, Convention "Alerte Enlèvement": plan d'alerte de la population en cas d'enlèvement d'un mineur, Ministère de la Justice République française, Paris, le 28 Février 2006.

52 Art. Préliminaire, Convention "Alerte Enlèvement": plan d'alerte de la population en cas d'enlèvement d'un mineur, Ministère de la Justice République française, Paris, le 28 Février 2006.

- The emergency Alert Enlèvement hotline and e-mail address.
- A picture of the youngster.
- Following warning message: *“Do not intervene yourself but please call the emergency number”*. It is considered that none of the partners has the authority to ask or tempt citizens in rescuing the abducted minor themselves<sup>53</sup>.
- Any other information that could help the case (for example: a description of the vehicle wherein the child was taken).

The disseminated message is a key point of the Alerte Enlèvement logic. It should motivate witnesses or citizens to report information that can help the investigation via a specific telephone number, which is a free of charge emergency hotline<sup>54</sup>.

If the investigators are certain of the abductors identity they can also disseminate his photograph or a detailed description<sup>55</sup>. The broadcasting of a message will be withhold as long as there are reasons to believe that public information dissemination can jeopardize the investigation or can endanger the life of the minor<sup>56</sup>.

Following (non-) governmental partners<sup>57</sup> disseminate the alert message<sup>58</sup>:

- Television channels, i.e. TF1, France 2, France 3, M6....
- Radio stations: public and private broadcasts.
- Companies in charge of the highways.

53 Art. Préliminaire, Convention “Alerte Enlèvement”: plan d’alerte de la population en cas d’enlèvement d’un mineur, Ministère de la Justice République française, Paris, le 28 Février 2006.

54 Art. Préliminaire, Convention “Alerte Enlèvement”: plan d’alerte de la population en cas d’enlèvement d’un mineur, Ministère de la Justice République française, Paris, le 28 Février 2006.

55 Following situations can motivate the decision of the public prosecutor of disseminating the photograph/description of the abductor:

- If the suspect is clearly identified and known to the authorities as a repeat offender;
- If the kidnapper is one of the parents/guardians of the youngster and clearly expressed his/her intention of killing the child;
- If the abductor has been filmed or photographed at the moment of the kidnapping.

In Convention “Alerte Enlèvement”: plan d’alerte de la population en cas d’enlèvement d’un mineur, Ministère de la Justice République française, Paris, le 28 Février 2006.

56 Art. 2, Convention “Alerte Enlèvement”: plan d’alerte de la population en cas d’enlèvement d’un mineur, Ministère de la Justice République française, Paris, le 28 Février 2006.

57 In 2010 ‘Alerte Enlèvement’ is adjusted. New partners are involved (the organizations ‘Française des jeux’ and ‘Fondation Casques Rouges’) and new dissemination channels are used (websites, smart phones and poster distributors) in disseminating the alert message.

58 Art. 9 Convention “Alerte Enlèvement”: plan d’alerte de la population en cas d’enlèvement d’un mineur, Ministère de la Justice République française, Paris, le 28 Février 2006.

- Transport agencies, i.e. the ‘Société Nationale de Chemins de Fer Français<sup>59</sup>’ (SNCF) and the ‘Régie Autonome des Transports Parisiens<sup>60</sup>’ (RATP).

The Alerte Enlèvement convention obliges media partners to broadcast the message every fifteen minutes during a period of three hours.

If, during the police investigation, more information about the abduction has turned up the alert will be modified by the Public prosecutor. In this case a renewed message must be broadcasted three hours longer<sup>61</sup>. The operational centre collects all testimonies and investigates it<sup>62</sup>.

#### 4.3.3. End Alerte Enlèvement

The Public prosecutor (of the district where the abduction is notified) is the qualified authority that can stop the Alerte Enlèvement. S/he will consult the General prosecutor and the Ministry of Justice<sup>63</sup> before taking the decision.

In general, the alert stops after three hours or when the child is recovered. If the youngster is found within the broadcasting period a message will be announced to inform the population about the developments. When the minor is recovered after the three hours the media will report this to the public during the news or via their websites<sup>64</sup>.

## 5. The Greek Centre for Missing and Sexually Exploited Children – Greece

The Greek Centre for Missing and Exploited Children is a department of the NGO ‘The Smile of the Child’. It was created in 1996 by a young boy who suffered from terminal cancer. His intention was to motivate people in creating a foundation that would ‘*help all children regardless of race or nationality*’ (The Smile of the Child – Welcome documents). The organization has several centers throughout the country<sup>65</sup>. Their mission is to protect the rights of children and support youngsters in Greece or Cyprus who may be in danger or whose legal guardians do not satisfy their needs (Mission statement ‘The Smile of the Child’: foundation and mission of the organization).

Smile of the child provides a national helpline 1056 and offers social support to minors with emotional and/or psychological problems.

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59 French National Railways Company.

60 Parisian Transportations Company.

61 Art. 9 Convention “Alerte Enlèvement”: plan d’alerte de la population en cas d’enlèvement d’un mineur, Ministère de la Justice République française, Paris, le 28 Février 2006.

62 *Ibid.*

63 *Ibid.*

64 Art. 9 Convention “Alerte Enlèvement”: plan d’alerte de la population en cas d’enlèvement d’un mineur, Ministère de la Justice République française, Paris, le 28 Février 2006.

65 In Athens, Thessaloniki, Phinikas Kalamarias, Patra, Ancient Corinth, Killini, Corfu, Pyrgos and Halkida.

The mandate of the organization includes a variety of activities (62583 Decision of the Deputy Minister of Health and Social Solidarity), for example the immediate intervention of youngsters in danger via the use of intervention vehicles, the availability of day care and Community Homes for kids in danger, managing the Greek Centre for Missing and Exploited children, counseling children with health difficulties and taking care for abused-, neglected- or abandoned minors<sup>66</sup>.

The centre also forms global partnerships in order to enhance their expertise<sup>67</sup>.

The Smile of the Child receives financial support through donations and contributions of private individuals- and enterprises as well as via their own fund-raising events (The Smile of the Child – Welcome documents).

The Greek Centre for Missing and Exploited Children has several goals, namely combating the danger of missing youngsters through prevention activities, raising public awareness towards the phenomena of child disappearances, assisting in locating missing minors, cooperation with public/private institutions, organizing training seminars, supporting parents, creation of leaflets that will be distributed via the Ministry of Public Order to all patrol cars in Greece, creation and distribution of posters in all publicly accessible areas and psychological counselling of children once they are located (The Smile of the Child – Welcome documents).

The Greek Centre provides a variety of services in the search for missing children such as communication with mass media via radio, television and printed media, collecting information from public testimonies (named and anonymous tips) and transmission of the information to police authorities, cooperation with national and international external partners (public and private organizations) and organizing conferences.

The Greek Centre for Missing and Exploited Children implements the European 116 000 hotline for missing children and Amber Alert Hellas (see infra) ([gr.missingkids.com/missingkids/servlet/PublicHomeServlet](http://gr.missingkids.com/missingkids/servlet/PublicHomeServlet)).

### 5.1. Target group

According to the organization a child/a minor is anyone who's under 18 years of age and whose whereabouts are unknown by his/her custodial parent(s) or legal guardian(s) (The Smile of the Child – Welcome documents).

<sup>66</sup> Other activities are: supporting poor children and minors with health conditions (medication for example), providing preventive projects concerning medical and dental issues, supporting blood-, blood platelets- and bone marrow donations, providing modern ambulances and taking care of creative activities in children's hospitals and airports.

<sup>67</sup> Global partners are: the International Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (ICMEC), Child Helpline International (CHI), Global Missing Children's Network, Missing Children Europe (MCE), the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations, and the United Nations Department of Public Information.

The Greek Centre of Missing and Exploited Children defines missing youngsters as minors whose parent's and/or legal guardians are not aware of their whereabouts (documents Amber Alert Hellas).

Child disappearances can be subdivided into five categories (documents Amber Alert Hellas):

- Stranger abductions
- Non-custodial parental abductions
- Runaways
- Child victims of trafficking or unaccompanied minors
- Lost, missing or otherwise injured children

A missing youngster is presumed to be in danger until information is available that proves otherwise<sup>68</sup>.

## **5.2. Cooperation between the Greek Centre and external partners**

In their search for missing children the centre works closely together with the Greek national police, the Public prosecutor for minors and the mass media (The Smile of the Child – Welcome documents).

The Ministry of Citizen's Protection<sup>69</sup> and Smile of the Child signed a 'Memorandum of understanding' in which several agreements are enumerated<sup>70</sup>. The document is created to improve cooperation strategies between both parties. It contains operational procedures in cases of endangered or missing youngsters. By signing the memorandum the Ministry and the Centre acknowledge, each according to their respective qualifications, the need to share information, experiences and best practices as well as the necessity to support policies and procedures concerning child disappearances.

Both institutions agree, with consideration of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, that in case of a missing minor the Greek Centre undertakes responsibility for poster- or flyer-distributions as well as information dissemination via the mass media after the public authorities and the parents give their consent. The Greek centre also provides support for the family of the disappeared child<sup>71</sup>.

68 Memorandum of understanding between the Ministry of Citizen's Protection and The Smile of the Child, Athens 2010.

69 The Greek National Police consists of the Hellenic Police, the National Intelligence Service, the Hellenic Coast Guard, Fire Brigade, General Secretariat for Civil Protection and the Hellenic Agrarian Police, <http://www.yptp.gr/main.php>.

70 Memorandum of understanding between the Ministry of Citizen's Protection and The Smile of the Child, Athens 2010.

71 Memorandum of understanding between the Ministry of Citizen's Protection and The Smile of the Child, Athens 2010.

If the Greek Centre is aware of a missing child it must inform the qualified authorities at once. The memorandum states that in case a of child disappearance police stations must accept formal written reports immediately since time is of the essence in recovering the missing minor. A proper assessment of the file, taking into account the conditions that endanger the safety of the youngster, is therefore needed. The Greek Centre cooperates with the Missing Person's Unit and the local police station by providing them with copies of the parent's written statements, releases and other necessary documents (for example a copy of custody orders...)72.

### **5.3. Amber Alert Hellas: procedure of information dissemination**

"Amber Alert Hellas", is the national public broadcasting system used in case of an extremely worrying child disappearance. This project was founded after the disappearance of a boy whose whereabouts were never discovered. Public appeals for assistance were launched two days after the case was reported. The Alex case initiated a lot of public indignation. According to the centre the "Alex-file" made deficiencies clear in training in the search for missing children, showed flaws in the cooperation between law enforcement agencies and other institutions, illustrated a lack of coordination in efficient broadcasting and a lack of public involvement in locating the disappeared youngster (documents Amber Alert Hellas).

In February 2006 the organization visited the National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) in Washington D.C. (USA) to collect information about the design of their rapid alert system (The Smile of the Child – Welcome documents). After this assembly the Greek Centre decided to import the emergency broadcasting system to their country. Amber Alert Hellas was launched in May 2007. Fifty public/private agencies73 were reached to contribute in activating the system.

The Ministry of Citizen's Protection designated the responsibility in activating the alert mechanism to the Missing Persons Unit in the Attica Security Division of the Greek police. Once they determine that the missing youngster is in immediate danger and an Amber Alert is necessary, it's up to the Greek Centre to start the procedure of information dissemination within a few minutes after the request. The process can take place on a local, national or international level. Region expansion is possible at any time or phase (The Smile of the Child – Welcome documents).

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72 Memorandum of understanding between the Ministry of Citizen's Protection and The Smile of the Child, Athens 2010.

73 Ministries and government agencies, television stations, radio stations, internet service providers, mobile telephone companies and telephone operators, private sponsors and voluntary organizations.



### 5.3.1. Start Amber Alert Hellas

The following criteria for launching Amber Alert Hellas are used (The Smile of the Child – Welcome documents):

- The missing person must be a minor.
- The health or life of the child must be in imminent danger.
- Standard information about the case must be available in order to launch an Amber Alert.
- Police authorities must decide that public information release does not endanger the safety of the child.
- Amber Alert aims at assisting the investigation in locating the missing youngster.

Certain factors or criteria concerning the missing case can be decisive or fasten the decision:

- The age of the minor plays a vital role: the younger the victim, the more serious the missing case gets.
- The mental, emotional and psychological condition of the child.
- Health issues. If there are serious reasons to believe that the minor is in a life-threatening situation this will hasten the decision.
- The following procedures need to be fulfilled before the Greek centre can take action (The Smile of the Child – Welcome documents):
- There must be a formal complaint file with the Greek police or with an equivalent body in international cases.
- A sworn declaration from both parents or from the parent with custody. In the last case, a true copy of the Court Custody Order is needed.
- If the disappearance file concerns a parental abduction it must contain the Custody Order and other requested legal documents.
- A photograph of the child must be available.

Amber Alert Hellas can only be activated by written order of the Greek National Police (The Smile of the Child – Welcome documents) and consent of the parents/guardians of the disappeared child (an affidavit)<sup>74</sup>.

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<sup>74</sup> Memorandum of understanding between the Ministry of Citizen's Protection and The Smile of the Child, Athens 2010.

### 5.3.2. Procedure Amber Alert Hellas

If the police service receives information concerning an extremely worrying child disappearance considers that an alert procedure could be necessary they contact the Missing Persons Unit. The local police service sends a request and a written consent from the parents/guardians of the missing youngster for activating Amber Alert Hellas. Police services must keep in contact with the appropriate Public prosecutor Agency to ensure that public information dissemination will not harm the investigation<sup>75</sup>. Once the Missing Persons Unit receives the request from the police service they assess the appropriateness of the demand. If the Unit agrees they contact the Greek Centre for Missing and Sexually Exploited Children to launch an Amber Alert Hellas. The necessity for an international launch can be considered at any time<sup>76</sup>.

If the Greek Centre is the first to be informed about a worrying child disappearance they will urge the parents/guardians to report the case to the appropriate police service so that the investigation and the process can begin immediately<sup>77</sup>.

The parents/guardians of the missing child send a photograph, a detailed description and a release form to the police and to the Greek Centre. The centre manages the alert mechanism by providing posters, mobile phone messages, flyers and TV and radio spots.

During the process the police and the Greek centre maintain contact to inform each other in case of further developments (documents Amber Alert Hellas).

Several public, private and voluntary organizations are closely involved in the mechanism of Amber Alert Hellas. They participate by means of following actions and communication tools (documents Amber Alert Hellas):

- Ministries<sup>78</sup> and public agencies<sup>79</sup>: distribution of the Amber Alert message on screens in Citizen's Service Centres across Greece, display boards for mass transportation, posters, electronic display boards positioned along roadways, screens in airports...
- Television and radio stations<sup>80</sup>: they make sure that programmes are interrupted on a regular basis in order to distribute the Amber Alert.

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75 Protocol concerning the activation of Amber Alert Hellas for missing children, 12/11/2007.

76 *Ibid.*

77 Protocol concerning the activation of Amber Alert Hellas for missing children, 12/11/2007.

78 Ministry of citizen's protection (Greek National Police), Ministry of Interior, decentralization and electronic governance, Ministry of infrastructure, transport and networks, Ministry of the environment, energy and climate change, Ministry of foreign affairs, Secretariat General for information, Ministry of justice, transparency and human rights, Ministry of health and social solidarity, Ministry of development, Ministry of culture and tourism, Ministry of economy, competitiveness and shipping.

79 Greek airports in Thessaloniki & Iraklion.

80 Public and private stations.

- Internet: several websites display the Amber Alert message on the first page of their portal so the viewer can momentarily see the information and photograph of the missing child.
- Mobile operators<sup>81</sup>: all mobile subscribers receive a text message with information about the disappeared child. If people want to participate in the search for missing youngsters they can send an SMS with their postal code to the national 1056 hotline after which they will be notified via their mobile phone each time an Amber Alert Hellas is activated. They receive a brief description of the disappeared child and other useful information. Each subscriber can cancel his enrolment in the Amber Alert Hellas programme by sending an SMS with the message 'NO' to 1056. Their number will be automatically removed from the list.

Private agencies/organizations:

- Airport: announcements and information display concerning the missing child in all accessible areas.
- Metro-stations: announcements on train platforms and visibility of the Amber Alert Hellas on all information boards.
- Highways: information about the disappearance case is displayed on electronic billboards.
- Water transportation agencies: public information dissemination via electronic message boards.
- Tram-stations: dissemination of the alert via electronic signs on platforms and in trams.
- Other organizations that display the Amber Alert Hellas: airlines, hotels, digital screen stands and DB databank (responsible for the technical aspect in the activation of an alert).

Voluntary agencies:

- Hellenic Rescue Team: local groups of the rescue team assist in the search for the missing child when an Amber Alert Hellas has been disseminated.
- Citizen's Action.
- Radio Amateur Association of Greece.

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81 COSMOTE – VODAFONE – WIND.

If people have information about the case they can contact the Greek Centre via the 116 000 hotline which is visible on every poster, flyer and TV spot and gets mentioned in every radio message. The Greek Centre gathers all information and sends it to the qualified authorities. During the process the organization coordinates communication between the parents/guardians, police services and voluntary search operations (documents Amber Alert Hellas).

### **5.3.3. End Amber Alert Hellas**

The Amber Alert stops if the appropriate police services decide to stop the investigation. They notify the Centre so that they can carefully remove the disseminated messages via all the used channels. During the alert all the participators must make notes of the place and instrument they used in order to disseminate the information. Messages on websites, TV-spots, posters, flyers... will be removed as quickly as possible (documents Amber Alert Hellas).

If the Greek Centre is the first institution to become aware that the child has been located they must contact the police at once<sup>82</sup>. If the police agrees the organization starts to remove all the disseminated messages.

## **5.4. Future developments concerning Amber Alert Hellas**

At present, the Greek Center is working on a project aimed at simplifying and automating the alert mechanism. The “European Child Alert Automated System (ECAAS)” seeks to create a uniform program that can be used trans-nationally throughout Europe to ensure fast, accurate and efficient communication between member states. The system will be a web-based application so that users and associated partners have direct access and will not require special hardware or infrastructure to use it. A common communication protocol will be implemented so that the alert activation can be automatically provided to all associated partners (national and local media, transport operators, airports...). The system leaves the opportunity for other members to join in<sup>83</sup>.

ECAAS will first focus on a better tuning of the possibilities to share information and alerts between the three neighbouring partner countries of Greece (Cyprus, Italy and Portugal). If this effort is executed successfully, other countries will be involved (Data collection questionnaire respondent Greek Centre for Missing and Sexually Exploited Children 14/05/2010).

## **6. Missing Persons Bureau – United Kingdom**

Policing structures are quite particular in the United Kingdom. It are especially these police forces that manage issues on missing persons.

The Missing Persons Bureau is part of the Crime Analyses Unit within the National Policing Improvement Agency (NPIA).

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<sup>82</sup> Protocol concerning the activation of Amber Alert Hellas for missing children, 12/11/2007.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

The NPIA is a non-departmental public body sponsored by the Home Office. The organization supports the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO)<sup>84</sup> by improving policing practices, developing essential services and providing responsive solutions ([www.npia.police.uk/en](http://www.npia.police.uk/en)). Many of the employees of NPIA are seconded police officers<sup>85</sup>.

The missing persons Bureau is an advisory body working alongside the police and related organizations throughout the United Kingdom as well as international and overseas (police) agencies (via Interpol, police services and NGO's)<sup>86</sup>. Their mission is to increase and improve effective services provided to missing person investigations ([www.npia.police.uk/en](http://www.npia.police.uk/en)).

The Missing Persons Bureau provides a wide range of services ([www.npia.police.uk/en](http://www.npia.police.uk/en)) including advice, support and guidance to help resolve disappearances and unidentified persons investigations as well as tactical analyses for suspicious files and assistance in reviews of 'cold cases'<sup>87</sup>. They focus on cross matching missing persons with unidentified individuals/bodies, maintain a dental index of ante mortem chartings of long term missing people and post mortem chartings from unidentified bodies and maintain records of disappearances ([www.npia.police.uk/en](http://www.npia.police.uk/en)). Specific activities for children include<sup>88</sup>:

- Co-ordination of the United Kingdom Child Rescue Alert.
- Assisting and supporting force trainings on missing and unidentified case investigations.
- Providing publicity for disappeared children in co-ordination with several partners (media, stores...).
- Comparing and disseminating good practices.
- Exchanging information connected with the search for all child disappearances on a national and international basis.
- Managing the UK website "Missing Kids" which is a part of the Global Missing Children's Network ([uk.missingkids.com/missingkids/servlet/PublicHomeServlet](http://uk.missingkids.com/missingkids/servlet/PublicHomeServlet)). This is a central multilingual database wherein a variety of information about disappearance cases throughout the world is exposed (like photographs, descriptions...) Seventeen countries participate in this platform.

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84 This is an independent and professionally led strategic body that works in equal and active partnership with the Government and the Association of Police Authorities. ACPO leads and coordinates the direction and development of the police service in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. In times of national need ACPO coordinates strategic policing response (in name of all chief officers). <http://www.acpo.police.uk/>, 14/04/2010, 10h44.

85 National Policing Improvement Agency (NPIA): A guide to how we support your investigation: Specialist Operational Support and Crime Analysis Units.

86 *Ibid.*

87 (Criminal) investigations that haven't been solved yet.

88 National Policing Improvement Agency (NPIA): A guide to how we support your investigation: Specialist Operational Support and Crime Analysis Units.

- Promoting International Missing Children's Day so people get aware of the phenomena.

In December 2009 the Prime Minister launched the Missing Persons Task Force with the intention of improving multi-agency cooperation. The Missing Persons Bureau is a member. It particularly recommends on risk assessment models for disappearance cases, data sharing capabilities, harnessing of existing good practice and dissemination to police forces throughout the United Kingdom. They also give support to data collection and analysis in order to enhance the general understanding of the missing persons phenomena ([www.npia.police.uk/en](http://www.npia.police.uk/en)).

### **6.1. Target Group**

Everyone under the age of eighteen is considered a minor in the United Kingdom except in Scotland where every sixteen-year-old is legally an adult (Muncie & Goldstone, 2006: 224).

The association of chief police officers (ACPO) defines a missing person as 'anyone whose whereabouts are unknown regardless of the circumstances of the disappearance.' An individual will be considered missing until s/he is located (Guidance on the management recording and investigation of missing persons, ACPO, 2005).

The Home Office defines two categories of abductions ([www.crimereduction.homeoffice.gov.uk/violence/violence12.htm](http://www.crimereduction.homeoffice.gov.uk/violence/violence12.htm)):

- Parental abduction: when the parent/guardian of the youngster takes or sends the child out of the United Kingdom without the appropriate consent (Child Abduction Act 1984, Sec 1).
- Child Abduction by other persons: when an individual other than the child's parents or guardians takes or detains the youngster under the age of sixteen without lawful authority or reasonable excuse (Child Abduction Act 1984, Sec 2)'.

The offences are grouped into 4 main types:

- Parental child abductions: kidnapping of a child by a parent or guardian.
- Stranger attempted child abductions: kidnappings by someone unknown to the child. The abduction wasn't successful.
- Stranger successful child abductions: kidnappings by someone not known to the child that succeeded.
- Other: successful and attempted abductions of a child by an individual that had previous relations with the child.

## 6.2. Cooperation between the Missing Persons Bureau and external partners

Besides police forces, The Missing Persons Bureau also has partnerships with other governmental agencies, NGO's and stakeholders<sup>89</sup>. There are several private associations that contribute in the prevention and management of disappearance cases. Other organizations (national and international) assist in various aspects of missing person investigations.

The Missing Persons Bureau promotes the development and use of protocols for collaborating with other agencies in which the roles and responsibilities of all parties are clearly written (Guidance on the management recording and investigation of missing persons, ACPO, 2005). At the moment the missing persons Bureau uses a draft protocol that will be completed as soon as possible.

## 6.3. Child Rescue Alert: procedure of information dissemination

Child Rescue Alert is an information dissemination system created to notify the public as quickly as possible. A Child Rescue Alert is defined as a partnership between the police, the media and the public that seeks the assistance of citizens in cases where a child has been abducted and where one fears it may be at risk of serious harm<sup>90</sup>. The essence of the system is to engage an entire community via media instruments as quickly as possible in the search for the child, the offender or any specified vehicle through sighting reports<sup>91</sup>.

The UK alert scheme has a pre-agreement with broadcasters by which the media states they will interrupt programs to send out a description about the missing child and the circumstances wherein s/he vanished in order to get statements from citizens<sup>92</sup>.

On the 14<sup>th</sup> November 2002 the Sussex constabulary launched the UK's Child Rescue Alert quickly followed by Surrey and Hampshire. The system was introduced slowly throughout England and Wales<sup>93</sup>.

### 6.3.1. Start Child Rescue Alert

There is reason to believe that a criminal event has happened before a public broadcasting gets started. Key aim for a Child Rescue Alert is the preservation of a child's life and the launch must be in the best interest of the investigation.

An official statement of the disappearance case must be made in the nearest local police station. If the missing youngster lives in another part of the United Kingdom the

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89 National Policing Improvement Agency (NPIA): A guide to how we support your investigation: Specialist Operational Support and Crime Analyses Units.

90 Child Rescue Alert, Draft protocol concerning the activation of a Child Rescue Alert, 2009.

91 *Ibid.*

92 Child Rescue Alert, Draft Media Protocol – Memorandum of Understanding between broadcasters and the police, 07/01/2010.

93 *Ibid.*

file will be transferred. When the disappearance occurred abroad local forces hand over the case to Interpol who will initiate enquiries in the country where the minor was last seen ([www.npia.police.uk/en](http://www.npia.police.uk/en)).

According to The Bureau there are two kinds of disappearances, namely kidnapping for gain and child abduction with a possible sexual and/or life-threatening danger. Each can require specific police responses namely overt actions (clearly visible) and covert actions (actions that are not visible). As it can be difficult to determine which offence type is dealt with and what kind of police response is required the Senior Investigation Officer (SIO) must carefully consider the options. There are several criteria that determine the decision.

Criteria for a Child Rescue Alert (documents Child Rescue Alert UK):

- The child is under 18 years old<sup>94</sup>: in some cases it can be impossible to confirm the exact age of the youngster. In such occasions the Senior Investigating Officer (SIO) and Gold Commander<sup>95</sup> will judge the individual circumstances of the situation<sup>96</sup>.
- There is reason to believe that the child has been abducted, kidnapped or taken under the influence of a third party: this applies for parental-and stranger abductions. A strict legal definition of the nature of disappearance is not required.
- There is reason to believe that the child is in imminent danger of serious harm (physical or psychological) or death: implied threats must be considered and noted in a policy file. For example: the offender's history, known aggressive behavior of the abductor...
- There is sufficient information available to enable the public to assist the police in locating the child: a Child Alert Rescue is not advisable if the information is too vague or general.

All of these criteria must be met before a Child Rescue Alert can start ([www.npia.police.uk/en](http://www.npia.police.uk/en)). The main decision whether or not an alert gets launched is its absolute necessity. One fears that an overuse might dilute the impact the procedure in such a way that people eventually will lose their confidence in the system ([www.npia.police.uk/en](http://www.npia.police.uk/en)).

According to The Bureau the decision-making process of launching a Child Rescue Alert can take approximately three hours wherein every step will be organized ([www.npia.police.uk/en](http://www.npia.police.uk/en)). During this time two action strategies are carefully executed<sup>97</sup>:

<sup>94</sup> The characteristic respects the European definition which implies that the measure is also applicable in Scotland (where a minor is defined as anyone that is younger than 16 years).

<sup>95</sup> Gold Commander: emergency services in the UK use a Gold/Silver/Bronze command structure. Purpose: establishing a hierarchical framework for the leadership and control of major incidents and disasters. In case of an emergency the Gold Commander is in overall supervision of the resources of the organization. He sits in a distant control room (Gold Command) where an action strategy will be formulated.

<sup>96</sup> Child Rescue Alert, Draft protocol concerning the activation of a Child Rescue Alert, 2009.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*



- Investigative actions: police investigators, guided by the SIO, must examine all the circumstances of the disappearance file. The draft-protocol states that launching an alert must be a necessity and not a first action strategy. Investigative actions include local inquiries, CCTV-checks, corroboration and verification of the gathered information concerning the reported missing case...
- Preparatory actions for launching a Child Rescue Alert: several strategies can be taken in conjunction with other partners and in consultation with the SIO who has overall control of the investigation. These actions include the consideration of tactical advice coming from the NPJA, warning organizations that handle with broadcasting/dissemination activities, preparing an alert text-message, identify dedicated operators to take care of incoming calls from citizens, consider recourse requirements in the Force Control Room (FCR), investigative response and the Major Incident Room (MIR), contacting the lead force to prepare the activation of a National Mutual Aid Telephone number, contacting external partners, consider how to communicate with other forces, examine what electronic system is appropriate, consider the use of certain databases and lastly consult with the gold commander.

### 6.3.2. Procedure Child Rescue Alert

A Child Rescue Alert can only start if a SIO, preferably trained in kidnapping and extortion, gives his/hers authorization. The gold commander or ACPO officer should ratify the call to launch<sup>98</sup>.

The first step in the process is the determination of which (local-national-international) forces are supplying mutual aid for call taking. Each police service should have one or two Direct Dial Numbers (DDI) that must be notified to the National Mutual Aid Telephony (NMAT) (documents Child Rescue Alert UK) that provides the necessary means to direct calls from the public via a single (0800 or 0207) number to police forces ([www.npia.police.uk/en](http://www.npia.police.uk/en)).

Next, all possible partners must be informed about launching the Child Rescue Alert. They will be briefed via the Police National Computer (PNC) broadcasting system or via e-mail concerning the circumstances of the disappearance and the used contact number of the investigating force.

Afterwards media-relations will be contacted about the upcoming Child Rescue Alert.

Although a Child Rescue Alert can vary, it mostly contains following information ([www.npia.police.uk/en](http://www.npia.police.uk/en)):

- Description of the child
- Scanned photo of the child

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<sup>98</sup> The officer can vary from force to force.

- Details of the location
- Description of the offender(s)
- CCTV/photo of the offender(s)
- Details of the used vehicle

The information that appears on the alert message depends on the context and circumstances of the disappearance. Important is the clarity of the released facts so that inappropriate calls can be avoided. The more descriptive the information is the better<sup>99</sup>.

According to the Bureau, launching a Child Rescue Alert can imply an increase of calls to the police by which technological means must be able to handle with exceptional circumstances. The MIRWeb is *'a high volume call handling system that can be accessed throughout the United Kingdom by police forces wishing to pass information directly to the Major Incident Room (MIR)*<sup>100</sup>. Deciding whether or not to use this instrument is the following step in the process.

Next, a policy file will be opened and updated as well as the consideration of assessing the impact of the missing case on the community. If needed, a family liaison officer can be appointed<sup>101</sup>.

If the police did not engage the Missing Persons Bureau for tactical advice during the previous steps they will be contacted now. The NGO 'Missing People'<sup>102</sup> gets notified as well<sup>103</sup>.

At this stage the media is fully engaged in the process because the Child Rescue Alert will be disseminated every fifteen minutes for a period of four hours. An Alert can be extended for two hours if it is authorized by the SIO. Regular updates concerning the development of the case are also possible. Meanwhile all the instruments are ready to send the information to the appropriate services. Investigators are standby in order to manage, prioritize and investigate incoming calls. Reports are assessed and significant messages are transferred into the investigation management system<sup>104</sup>.

Every partner in the communication chain will be informed about the developments of the case<sup>105</sup>.

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99 Child Rescue Alert, Draft protocol concerning the activation of a Child Rescue Alert, 2009.

100 Child Rescue Alert, Draft protocol concerning the activation of a Child Rescue Alert, 2009.

101 *Ibid.*

102 Missing People provides support for missing children, vulnerable adults and neglected families. They offer specialist advice and practical support to families of missing people and to investigators. <http://www.missingpeople.org.uk/>, 08/04/2010, 16h02.

103 Child Rescue Alert, Draft protocol concerning the activation of a Child Rescue Alert, 2009.

104 *Ibid.*

105 *Ibid.*

### 6.3.3. End Child Rescue Alert

The SIO and gold commander can decide to cancel or end a Child Rescue Alert. They must motivate their decision. According to the draft protocol once an alert has ended this must be broadcasted as widely as possible in order to avoid confusion among the public or overburdening investigating officers with outdated information<sup>106</sup>.

A Child Rescue Alert can be cancelled any time after which the investigating force must inform all partners via<sup>107</sup>:

- E-mail to all forces in which all forces are notified they must stand down call takers.
- PNC Broadcast.
- Media contact.

All NMAT calls must be directed to the investigating force in order to manage the residue of the calls.

The press officer manages the cancellation of the alert and must seek for instructions coming from the SIO. Since media attention and public response can be huge the draft protocol advises that preparations and debriefings should be considered<sup>108</sup>.

## 7. Korps Landelijke Politiediensten – The Netherlands

The decision whether or not to launch an alert message in the Netherlands lies within the authority of the police. 'Regiokorpsen' (Regional Police Forces), the 'Korps Landelijke Politiediensten KLPD' (Netherlands/National Police Agency) and the 'Royal Marechaussee' (gendarmerie) provide law enforcement in this country ([www.politie.nl](http://www.politie.nl)). This part of the research only focuses on the national police force.

The KLPD provides several operational departments including the National Crime Squad, the National Police Intelligence Service, Special Investigative Services, Royal and Diplomatic Security Services and Special Intervention Services. It is also responsible for combating terrorism and organized crimes, maintaining safety on roads, waterways, railways and airways, reassuring the protections of witnesses... ([www.politie.nl](http://www.politie.nl)).

The 'Landelijk Bureau Vermiste Personen LBVP' (National Missing Persons Bureau) is a specialized unit within the KLPD that provides support to regional police forces and investigates disappearance cases. It decides whether or not to start an Amber Alert ([www.amberalertnederland.nl/](http://www.amberalertnederland.nl/)). The KLPD manages several systems by which they can locate persons in the Netherlands including the (

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106 *Ibid.*

107 *Ibid.*

108 Child Rescue Alert, Draft protocol concerning the activation of a Child Rescue Alert, 2009.

- National Schengen Information System (NSIS)
- Opsporingsregister OPS (Search register): a system that makes registrations of people who are being searched.
- Vermiste Personen Systeem VPS (Missing Persons System): a special system that is created to register missing individuals and their descriptions.

Several specialists within the LBVP help regional police forces in the search for missing people. Since 1999 every local police corps<sup>109</sup> in the Netherlands has a coordinator that manages activities concerning disappearances within their appointed region. A central coordinator at the LBVP is the contact point of all the local coordinators and of foreign police forces ([nl.missingkids.com/missingkids/servlet/PublicHomeServlet?LanguageCountry=nl\\_NL&](http://nl.missingkids.com/missingkids/servlet/PublicHomeServlet?LanguageCountry=nl_NL&)).

The LBVP handles all disappearances but pay extra attention to missing children. It collaborates with the American National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) and integrates knowledge concerning investigational resources like, for example, aging-photography into their organization ([nl.missingkids.com/missingkids/servlet/PublicHomeServlet?LanguageCountry=nl\\_NL&](http://nl.missingkids.com/missingkids/servlet/PublicHomeServlet?LanguageCountry=nl_NL&)).

Via the collaboration with NCMEC, sponsorship and the support of several computer companies the LBVP can place descriptions of missing children on the internet and create posters in different sizes ([nl.missingkids.com/missingkids/servlet/PublicHomeServlet?](http://nl.missingkids.com/missingkids/servlet/PublicHomeServlet?)).

## 7.1. Target Group

The classification of (child) disappearances is structured according to the degree of seriousness. Missing persons are subdivided into three main categories ([nl.missingkids.com/missingkids/servlet/PublicHomeServlet?LanguageCountry=nl\\_NL&](http://nl.missingkids.com/missingkids/servlet/PublicHomeServlet?LanguageCountry=nl_NL&)):

- High-risk cases. These files involve following disappearances:
  - The person is younger than twelve years of age.
  - The individual is seriously or mentally ill.
  - The person might be in need of medical assistance.
  - When traces of a criminal act are present.
  - If indications of a possible suicide exist.
  - There are reasons to believe the person might run unacceptable risks.
  - The person is younger than 18 years old and s/he is probably accompanied with people who've got criminal intentions.
  - The individual is an adult (> 18 years) and suddenly disappeared without reasons. S/he did not take personal belongings and left without means of transportation.

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<sup>109</sup> The Netherlands has 25 regional police forces.

- The missing person can be a danger to others.
- In case of a high-risk disappearance the police will take immediate action.
- Low-risk cases. These files involve missing persons who probably left voluntarily and are not likely to run serious risks. This concerns:
  - Youngsters between 12 and 18 years with recent problems at school or at home.
  - Minors and adults with a history of running away.
  - Youngsters who've threatened to run away.
  - Adults who've given indications that they're dissatisfied and might start a new life somewhere else. Usually they've taken personal belongings with them.

If there's a doubt about the degree of seriousness of the case (high-risk or low-risk) a police officer will investigate the circumstances more thoroughly by filling in a questionnaire at the place of disappearance or at the home of the missing individual. S/He will also look for any particular clues that could tell more about the situation. The decision whether or not the disappearance is a high-risk or a low-risk case is based on the additional information.

- Absconders

This category is treated separately because of judicial and practical reasons. If the disappearance involves circumstances that can be defined as high-risk indicators the case should be classified as such. Otherwise a different procedure will be followed that mainly consists of registrations and notifying interested partners. If the absconder<sup>110</sup> has a history of violence the police of the missing persons' hometown should be contacted.

Cases involving kidnapping by unknown persons are treated as high-risk situations. The degree of seriousness concerning international parental abductions can vary. In these cases the police contacts the Central Authority of the Dutch Ministry of Justice ([www.interpol.int/Public/Children/Missing/NationalLaws/mcFirstPage.asp](http://www.interpol.int/Public/Children/Missing/NationalLaws/mcFirstPage.asp)).

## 7.2. Cooperation between Landelijk Bureau Vermiste Personen en external partners

The LBVP also has various partners within the private sphere including ([nl.missingkids.com/missingkids/servlet/PublicHomeServlet?LanguageCountry=nl\\_NL&](http://nl.missingkids.com/missingkids/servlet/PublicHomeServlet?LanguageCountry=nl_NL&)):

- Computer Associates International, Inc. (CA): the LPVP uses their software through NCMEC via the Global Missing Children Network. Via this software the Dutch police can manage their own website, an online database containing descriptions of missing children (which is a part of NCMEC) and other useful communication possibilities.

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<sup>110</sup> Absconders are:

- People who left hurriedly and secretly, mostly to avoid detection or an arrest;
- People who failed to surrender themselves for custody at the appointed time;
- People who were kept in detention or under supervision and escaped.

- Sun Microsystems, Inc.: provided the LBVP with providers through which their website is accessible.
- Communication company 'Netpresenter': collaborates with the LVBP in function of the Amber Alert project.

### **7.3. Amber Alert: procedure of information dissemination**

In the Netherlands, the Minister of Justice launched a Child Alert project on the 11<sup>th</sup> November 2008 (Documentation concerning the launching of the Dutch Amber Alert). The main aim of the Amber Alert system is to reach a large range of citizens who can contribute in the search for the disappeared child as quickly as possible. According to the Dutch contributors time is essential in disappearance cases and a fast anticipation of all partners involved can help locating the missing youngster (Documentation concerning the launching of the Dutch Amber Alert).

The Dutch Amber Alert (named after the US example) is a national warning system by which cases of urgent child disappearances- and kidnappings get public attention. Via a variety of information dissemination instruments, including television, websites, e-mails, digital screens, billboards, notifications next to highways, mobile phones, social media and instant messaging, the entire nation can be involved in the search for the missing youngster. The designers and suppliers of the software and the technological maintenance of the alert system is a 'fully sponsored private initiative that is developed and managed pro bono by "Netpresenter"' (Documentation concerning the launching of the Dutch Amber Alert) and its aim is to increase the chances of a successful investigation ([www.netpresenter.nl/amber-alert.html](http://www.netpresenter.nl/amber-alert.html)). Since the costs of the Amber Alert project are high, the Dutch Ministry of Justice will support the system in the near future.

The director of the communication company "Netpresenter" took the initiative in cooperation with the Dutch police to develop Amber Alert. This private organization created the technological aspects of the system and offered it free of charge to the public authorities ([www.netpresenter.nl/amber-alert.html](http://www.netpresenter.nl/amber-alert.html)).

The 'Landelijk Bureau Vermiste Personen', which is part of the KLPD, has full responsibility in the decision-making process of launching a public alert. This Bureau also decides what the content of the broadcasting message must be ([www.amberalertnederland.nl](http://www.amberalertnederland.nl)).

"Netpresenter" ([www.netpresenter.nl/over-netpresenter.html](http://www.netpresenter.nl/over-netpresenter.html)), is responsible for the technological broadcasting actions. The company also tries to motivate external associates (organizations and citizens) to engage in the dissemination network<sup>111</sup>. Several other partners also sponsor the alert system ([www.amberalertnederland.nl](http://www.amberalertnederland.nl)).

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111 Narrowcasting means transmitting a television program, especially by cable, or otherwise disseminate information to a comparatively small audience defined by special interests or geographical location.

Although the Amber Alert project is active in the Netherlands there's no special legislation available ([www.amberalertnederland.nl](http://www.amberalertnederland.nl)). The police decide on all the dissemination actions.

### **7.3.1. Start Amber Alarm mechanism**

Criteria for a Dutch Amber Alert (Documentation concerning the launching of the Dutch Amber Alert):

- The child must be younger than 18 years.
- There's an immediate danger to the child's life or there's a serious threat to the child's well being.
- A photo of the child must be available as well as sufficient information (for example: a possible suspect or a vehicle that was involved).
- Data of the missing child must be included in the National Schengen Information System (NSIS) as soon as possible together with the request for the tracing and repatriation of the minor.

An Amber Alert will be launched immediately if the child is presumably in a life-threatening situation ([www.amberalertnederland.nl](http://www.amberalertnederland.nl)).

### **7.3.2. Procedure Amber Alert**

If a child disappeared the local police must make a report of the event after which a local inquiry will be executed. If the youngster has not been found the regional investigator can decide to contact the Amber Alert coordinator. This person has the final decision right in launching the process of public information dissemination ([www.amberalertnederland.nl](http://www.amberalertnederland.nl)).

The following information must be available if an Amber Alert is requested ([www.amberalertnederland.nl](http://www.amberalertnederland.nl)):

- A photo and description of the missing child (i.e. noted on an Amber Alert application form by the qualified authorities).
- A telephone number for putting through the calls from the national missing persons hotline. There must be enough lines open so that an effective handling with incoming tips can be ensured.
- An available contact person to whom other information can be passed on.
- Possibilities to inform the public relations network department of the police so they can contact the media concerning developments of the disappearance case.

Everyone can voluntarily receive an Amber Alert via a wide variety of technological instruments. Since the Dutch National Police is responsible for the content of the disseminated information there won't be any advertising connected to the message. The qualified authorities guarantee full respect of privacy issues during the alert procedure ([www.netpresenter.nl/amber-alert.html](http://www.netpresenter.nl/amber-alert.html)).

An Amber Alert can be disseminated via several information-instruments. Through the website [www.amberalertnederland.nl](http://www.amberalertnederland.nl) everyone can register voluntarily into the system by which they commit themselves in receiving messages concerning worrying child disappearances. However, they cannot place notifications on the web themselves. Citizens and public/private organizations can download software or fill in their references. All members are ensured their privacy is respected and that registration-forms are exclusively used for alert messages coming from the Dutch police. People can choose between several instruments (or register on all of them) on which they can receive an alert ([www.amberalertnederland.nl](http://www.amberalertnederland.nl)):

- On a personal computer: e-mail, instant messenger, pop-up alert, screensavers, twitter and RSS-feed.
- On a mobile phone: owners of a mobile phone can send a free of charge text message to the number 8844 by which they register themselves.
- On a (personal/professional) website: Banner (Hyves/Google), RSS-feed, twitter, website alert.
- On a plasma/LCD screen: placed in visible locations including schools, libraries, offices, stores...

An Amber Alert can also be disseminated via television and posters campaigns. Every public broadcasted message will also be visual on the webpage of the Dutch police. Sponsorships are sought in order to promote the project. Anyone can download the Amber Alert logo for free by which the system can be promoted or supported throughout the Netherlands. Misuse of the public broadcasting symbol is not allowed ([www.amberalertnederland.nl](http://www.amberalertnederland.nl)).

The Amber Alert is created with attention for expanding possibilities and it can be linked to other systems (Documentation concerning the launching of the Dutch Amber Alert).

Amber Alerts are currently launched on a national basis although they're planning to develop the possibilities of the system in the near future by disseminate information locally or regionally. When people register into the system they can fill in their postal code. Reason for this lays precisely in the plans of a territorially based information dissemination concerning worrying child disappearances ([www.amberalertnederland.nl](http://www.amberalertnederland.nl)). Since the start of the project the Netherlands have launched three alerts.



### 7.3.3. End Amber Alarm mechanism

Every partner of the Amber Alert must check the developments of the case on a regular basis. The news page of the alert website ([www.amberalertnederland.nl](http://www.amberalertnederland.nl)) keeps the public informed of developments. If a case has been solved the police will also notify the media. If the whereabouts of the child have been recovered all messages must be removed ([www.amberalertnederland.nl](http://www.amberalertnederland.nl)).

## 8. Initiative Vermisste Kinder – Germany

The German procedure of information dissemination is complex. Both public and private organizations can launch an information campaign, each with or without their mutual assistance. On the one hand the private organization 'Initiative Vermisste Kinder' takes care of public information campaigns, on the other hand the German police organizations (who are responsible for tracing missing youngsters) create wanted notices ([www.interpol.int/Public/Children/Missing/NationalLaws/mcFirstPage.asp](http://www.interpol.int/Public/Children/Missing/NationalLaws/mcFirstPage.asp)). Nevertheless, it is Initiative Vermisste Kinder that started with the intention to develop an Amber Alarm.

Policing methods concerning the search for missing people are described in the "Polizeidienstvorschrift (PDV) 389 – Vermisste, unbekannte Tote, unbekannte hilflose Personen"<sup>112</sup>. These guidelines define how investigational procedure expire, with whom the police can collaborate, what is defined as a 'child disappearance'...

The German organization 'Initiative Vermisste Kinder' is a community interest company (Self-portrait Initiative Vermisste Kinder CIC) that was founded in 1997 after a nationwide action called 'Wir helfen suchen'<sup>113</sup> that was broadcasted on television. Although the initial basis of the association is build around a voluntary network, the present structure of the NGO has a more professional composition ([www.vermisste-kinder.de](http://www.vermisste-kinder.de)). In each of the sixteen German Bundesländer<sup>114</sup> the association has coordinators that structure possible interventions and search for new volunteers (Self-portrait Initiative Vermisste Kinder CIC). Initiative Vermisste Kinder works within the interest of families and victims that are involved in child disappearance cases ([www.interpol.int/Public/Children/Missing/NationalLaws/mcFirstPage.asp](http://www.interpol.int/Public/Children/Missing/NationalLaws/mcFirstPage.asp)). The mission statement of the organization is to provide social welfare tasks and assist in investigations concerning missing youngsters. Over the years the association has constructed a network of national and international organizations (Self-portrait Initiative Vermisste Kinder CIC).

The goals of Initiative Vermisste Kinder are (Self-portrait Initiative Vermisste Kinder CIC):

- Providing prevention methods, strategies, encouragement, legal measures and support towards police investigations concerning child disappearances, abductions

112 PDV 389 – Vermisste, unbekannte Tote, unbekannte hilflose Personen (Ausgabe 2004).

113 We help to find.

114 Germany has sixteen states.

and exploitation of minors. They make use of the internet (e.g. Second Life) and software possibilities to meet these standards.

- Ensuring free of charge support and guidance to under age victims and their families.

The NGO is initially sponsored by its founder, Monika Bruhns, but now also receives support from a variety of private organizations like Stroër Infoscreens and volunteers (Self-portrait Initiative Vermisste Kinder CIC).

### **8.1. Target Group**

Child disappearances are not categorized within the German legislation because they consider all minors missing once they have left their place of residence and when their current whereabouts are unknown. This guideline is also applicable for parental abductions ([www.interpol.int/Public/Children/Missing/NationalLaws/mcFirstPage.asp](http://www.interpol.int/Public/Children/Missing/NationalLaws/mcFirstPage.asp)). Initiative Vermisste Kinder subdivides disappearance cases of children and youngsters in four categories namely ([www.vermisste-kinder.de](http://www.vermisste-kinder.de)):

- Runaways (from home or an institution)
- Inexplicable abductions
- Parental abductions
- Abductions from strangers
- International abductions

‘Children’ are considered all individuals until 14 years of age whereas ‘minors’ involve everyone between the age of 14 and 17 years ([www.vermisste-kinder.de](http://www.vermisste-kinder.de)).

### **8.2. Corporation between Initiative Vermisste Kinder and external partners**

There is not an official or organized agreement available between private organizations and the German police. Possible collaboration strategies depend on the missing case file ([www.interpol.int/Public/Children/Missing/NationalLaws/mcFirstPage.asp](http://www.interpol.int/Public/Children/Missing/NationalLaws/mcFirstPage.asp)). In general, Initiative Vermisste Kinder works together with several local police services and private organizations involved with victim counselling and technologies of information dissemination ([www.vermisste-kinder.de](http://www.vermisste-kinder.de)):

- Landespolizei: several local police services collaborate with Initiative Vermisste Kinder but various bureaus do not calculate the private organization to their list of partners. According to the NGO the reason for this is primarily the unfamiliarity of the foundation (Data collection questionnaire Initiative Vermisste Kinder 14/04/2010).

- Weisser Ring: this is an ‘eingetragener Verein’ (NGO) that provides support to victims of crimes and foresees prevention strategies concerning criminal acts.
- Stroër Infoscreen: Initiative Vermisste Kinder collaborates with Stroër since 2008. This company provides ‘digital out of home media’ throughout Germany. They develop, create and promote digital advertising device concepts with suitable formats and install infoscreens in subways, airports and local/main train stations ([www.infoscreen.de/de/startseite/](http://www.infoscreen.de/de/startseite/)).
- e110: a safety portal that collaborates with the television program “Aktenzeiche XY ungelöst” from the German broadcasting station ZDF. They provide information and advise to citizens concerning security, criminality, disappearances, wanted notices and prevention strategies.
- International associations: in order to broaden their reach and support international cooperation Initiative Vermisste Kinder collaborates with International Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (ICMEC) and Missing Children Europe (MCE).

### **8.3. Amber Alarm: Procedure of information dissemination**

The German ‘Amber Alarm’ is founded with the intention of creating a central emergency call system for missing children. It is a free service that can be applied on a regional or national level and its completely organized by the association Initiative Vermisste Kinder. The aim of Amber Alarm is to mobilize the public as quickly as possible in the search for missing youngsters. Police services emphasize the importance to take search measures within the first three hours after the officials reported the disappearance ([missing-kids.eu/amberalarm/](http://missing-kids.eu/amberalarm/)).

#### **8.3.1. Start Amber Alarm mechanism**

The ‘Landespolizei’ (local police) services are responsible for the search of missing youngsters ([www.interpol.int/Public/Children/Missing/NationalLaws/mcFirstPage.asp](http://www.interpol.int/Public/Children/Missing/NationalLaws/mcFirstPage.asp)). They can mobilize Initiative Vermisste Kinder if they recognize the organization as a partner. Not all police forces have an agreement with the association and disseminate information concerning the disappeared minor via other procedures (Data collection questionnaire Initiative Vermisste Kinder 14/04/2010). The NGO can only launch an alert if they have the consent of the responsible police services.

Initiative Vermisste Kinder states that an Amber Alert can only start if ‘a public information campaign can contribute to the investigation’ (Data collection questionnaire Initiative Vermisste Kinder 14/04/2010). What are the requirements in order to launch an Amber Alert (Data collection questionnaire Initiative Vermisste Kinder 14/04/2010)?

- The investigators have concrete indications that an abduction took place.
- The missing child is 17 years or younger.

- The case is reported at a local police station.
- The police investigators assume the missing youngster is in physical danger or in a life-threatening situation.
- There must be enough information available concerning the description of the abducted child and the circumstances in which s/he disappeared.

### **8.3.2. Procedure Amber Alarm**

The Amber Alarm project in Germany is a free of charge dissemination system by which several instruments can be used in order to search for missing youngsters. Everyone can register voluntarily via the website [missing-kids.eu/amberalarm/](http://missing-kids.eu/amberalarm/) by which they commit themselves in receiving messages concerning worrying child disappearances. People can choose between several instruments (or register on all of them) whereby they receive an alert ([missing-kids.eu/amberalarm/](http://missing-kids.eu/amberalarm/)):

- Mobile phones: owners of a mobile phone can send a free of charge text message to the number 84343 by which they register themselves. They can undo their engagement at any time. People can choose between two application forms namely the registration request to receive alerts from the entire Bundesrepublik or from a specific state within Germany.
- Fax: citizens or companies can be informed via fax after they have registered themselves.

Through their partnership with private organization “Stroër Infoscreens” Initiative Vermisste Kinder can also disperse information via digital billboards that alert passengers about the disappearance case (Self-portrait Initiative Vermisste Kinder CIC).

If Initiative Vermisste Kinder received the consent of the German police they send a message to all registered citizens and companies. They also visualize the message on their website and create a short movie with photos of the missing minor.

There is not any legislation available concerning the utilization of the media and the dissemination of information via various communication channels ([www.interpol.int/Public/Children/Missing/NationalLaws/mcFirstPage.asp](http://www.interpol.int/Public/Children/Missing/NationalLaws/mcFirstPage.asp)). However, there are certain informal agreements that could influence the decision making process (Data collection questionnaire Initiative Vermisste Kinder 14/04/2010). Before a disappearance case can be publicly knowable the police must give their consent, since they can assess whether or not the disseminated message could damage the missing person or the position s/he has in society ([www.interpol.int/Public/Children/Missing/NationalLaws/mcFirstPage.asp](http://www.interpol.int/Public/Children/Missing/NationalLaws/mcFirstPage.asp)).

Once the decision is made to launch an information campaign and involve citizens into the inquiry, a special telephone-line must be installed through which reports can be received. A standard emergency number is not available. The police have the obligation

to note and investigate all incoming calls including anonymous tips concerning missing youngsters ([www.interpol.int/Public/Children/Missing/NationalLaws/mcFirstPage.asp](http://www.interpol.int/Public/Children/Missing/NationalLaws/mcFirstPage.asp)). Initiative Vermisste Kinder has a free emergency hotline that operates twenty-four hours a day and can be used to support the investigators in their search for the disappeared minor. They also provide a mailing service on which citizens can send information (Self-portrait Initiative Vermisste Kinder CIC).

### **8.3.3. End Amber Alarm mechanism**

The Amber Alarm stops if the German police decides to stop the investigation. They notify the Initiative Vermisste Kinder so that they can remove the alert messages. The news page of the Amber Alarm website keeps the public informed of the developments of the case [missing-kids.eu/amberalarm](http://missing-kids.eu/amberalarm)).

## **8.4. Future developments concerning Amber Alarm**

The main aim of Initiative Vermisste Kinder is to enlarge their network and enhance collaboration strategies with police services. Since the NGO is still developing they hope to extend dissemination possibilities in order to alarm the German public.

## **9. Strengths and weaknesses of the European Alert systems**

Following section discusses the strengths and weaknesses of each selected Child Alert model that was presented in this study. In order to have a reliable view on the effects of such systems, all European respondents involved in this research were questioned via mail or telephone<sup>115</sup>.

### **9.1. France: Alerte Enlèvement**

The Ministry of Justice defines the involvement of the public as an asset to the investigation. The French alert system has a very strict communication model. It's one of the few described procedures that designed judicial documents. The French Ministry experiences this as an asset of the model because it protects the system against forms of misuse. They state that a Child Alert should only be used in case of a worrying abduction case. According to the Ministry, a broadcasting instrument that is rarely used increases the 'shock – effect'.

However, if the Ministry had to re-launch the model again they would change the criteria of a real abduction into criteria of a likely abduction. The downside of using strict guidelines can endanger a flexible usage.

At present, the French system is operated by three different call systems. Just one operating room would be more effective, because incoming testimonies would be better managed and controlled.

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115 Appendix 2.

## 9.2. Greece: Amber Alert Hellas

The Greek Centre has positive experiences towards the system since it provides multiple possibilities under which the opportunity to involve the public rapidly. Citizens can contribute to the investigation and give information to the authorities concerning a child disappearance. According to the Greek Centre, one of the benefits of their alert model is the focus of youngsters that are in immediate danger instead of solely aim at stranger abductions. Motivation for this is that lost, injured children or minors that went missing for undefined reasons are often part of a high-risk category, which means that life-threatening cases mostly outstand other criteria.

Respecting the short amount of time on which an alert must launch, the Greek guidelines have a clear task distribution: the police decide when an Amber Alert Hellas is needed and the Centre controls the model. Agreements with structural partners, volunteers and broadcasting companies are also carefully arranged which means that once the alarming message is disseminated every actor involved in the system has a clear view on his or her part in the process.

According to the foundation people are not always willing to get involved in a police investigation or to give their references. In this case they can dial the hotline number 116 000 and contact the Greek Centre. The NGO explains that their independent status can motivate citizens to contribute in the search for missing youngsters. Greek publicity concerning the alert project underlined that child disappearances are not solely a police matter but a joint effort between public/private bodies and civil society.

Since several organizations within the public-private sphere invest in the project all the disseminated messages are free of charge for the structural partners involved in Amber Alert Hellas, which means that broadcasting companies, mobile phone agencies, radio stations... do not have to provide financial assistance in order to keep the system operational. The associates can implement the format of the alert message effectively because it's designed as such. Since all actions have to be rapidly executed the technological means of the system must be able to answer to these conditions.

Nevertheless, the Greek Centre also sees flaws in the technical methods that are currently used in the Amber Alert Hellas procedure namely the manual mode of operation. Once an alert is launched all partners must be notified and they have to choose the format of the message manually. According to the Greek Centre, another disadvantage of the mechanism is that operational proceedings must be retested and retrained by the practitioners on a regular basis since the project is not frequently used.

One of the things the Greek Centre would implement in their alert system if they had to re-launch it again is the encouragement of more publicity regarding the aim of an Amber Alert Hellas, so that if an actual message is disseminated citizens know the importance of the situation and the needfulness of their assistance.

### **9.3. United Kingdom: Child Rescue Alert**

Child Rescue Alert is one of the few models that implements a media protocol for press coverage during the investigation, which the NPIA describes as an advantage that should be extended to local broadcasting companies. Clear arrangements with media providers and an (inter)national operating overview delivers a contribution in the creation of an efficient communication model. Journalists and press co-workers have experience in disseminating information to society and know how to launch messages that will attract people's attention. The way they draft the content of a report and the decisions they make during the process are related to the field in which they function. An overview of their contribution in the alert design is set up in order to guarantee sufficient collaboration opportunities.

Child Rescue Alert can be used locally and nationally. According to the Missing Persons Bureau this is an advantage because it increases the flexible usage of the system.

One of the disadvantages of the model is the age-regulation. Legal guidelines are often difficult to follow because missing youngsters who are a little older than eighteen years often apply for an alert. Another difficulty is to discover whether or not a child has been abducted. This means that it's also difficult to decide whether or not an alert is needed.

The Missing Persons Bureau recommends using a project manager or a project team because it would monitor the process better. According to the Bureau, everybody's part in the dissemination process should be (role police – NGO's – judicial authorities) defined, because it would make collaboration strategies easier.

A Child Alert project is not without risks. It can be used in the correct circumstances but jeopardize the recovery of the child. Or, it can be used in the wrong circumstances and damage the confidence of citizens.

### **9.4. The Netherlands: Amber Alert**

According to the Dutch police, an important benefit of the alert system that it can be used locally and nationally. You can enlarge the dissemination reach at any time during the process. An alert is rarely used and leaves a shock effect on citizens. This motivates people to contribute to the investigation.

The Dutch police disseminates one alert message for every missing case, which is enough to collect information from citizens. Re-launching an alert message is, according to the Dutch police, not necessary.

A lot of people are registered users, which implies that people know the system. The Dutch police think that the so-called 'network effect' has an important effect on the usability of the model.

Police officers do not always use the project. Identifying whether or not a child is abducted is not without difficulties. All depends on the first assessment. Another weakness is the cost of the project. Using effective dissemination means can be expensive. Collaboration strategies with private corporations can be an asset.

The Dutch police recommend implementing international working strategies. A uniform system could make collaboration strategies better. They propose to create a model that can be used locally as well as nationally.

The criteria of the project should not be broadened, because it would increase the chance of misuse. Criteria should be flexible and clear at the same time.

### **9.5. Germany: Amber Alarm**

Like previous organizations, Initiative Vermisste Kinder acclaims the rapidly usable opportunities of an Amber Alarm: within a short amount of time many citizens can be alerted. The design of the communication system is manufactured so that it can be used on a local or national level, which the organization defines as one of the strongest benefits of the model. Since the search area (place of disappearances and location where the child was last seen) can vary, it's useful to have a communication model that takes the shifting of investigational regions into account.

Amber Alarm offers people the choice whether or not they want to get involved in the procedure. Everyone can be a part of the system without the obligation of paying registration costs, which means that the alert model is accessible in its usability. Initiative Vermisste Kinder states that Amber Alarm is an instrument that is easy to work with since they take care of all operational proceedings, ensuring registered people that they won't have to invest much time in the project.

The German alert scheme, as we saw in the description of the European communication models, differs from other systems since they do not have any protocols or structural agreements with judicial authorities, public/private organizations and media companies concerning the dissemination of child disappearances. They mostly appeal to the contribution of volunteers (individuals and companies). Amber Alarm is a communication model that is created in a timeframe wherein public outrage exceeded the normal state of affairs. Since Initiative Vermisste Kinder is constituted with the intention of protecting children's well being and involving the assistance of citizens during disappearances, the alert model is a new way of announcing missing case files to society. However, the technological means by which the foundation disseminates information are limited. Alarming citizens via fax or SMS only reaches a restricted audience and the message content is not always clear. Although people receive a photo, they also must have the intention to visit the website in order to visualize the disappeared youngster effectively.

Unlike the other countries discussed in this study, wanted notices in Germany are less promoted and mainly a matter of the local police. Although Initiative Vermisste Kinder



has collaboration agreements with several “Landespolizei” services the situation is, according to the organization, not optimal. The majority of police forces do not know the aim or mission statement of the foundation and have no practical agreements with the association, which means that the opportunities of public dissemination are limited. At the moment, the assignments of Initiative Vermisste Kinder are mainly focussed on prevention, providing assistance to victims and launching alerts to the enlisted subscribers.

## APPENDIX 6: OVERVIEW EU CHILD ALERT SYSTEMS

COUNTRY	ORGANIZATION	CONTRIBUTION IN DISAPPEARANCE CASES
<b>Belgium</b>	Child Focus (NGO)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collecting data</li> <li>• Information dissemination</li> <li>• Supporting victims</li> <li>• Supporting family of the missing child</li> </ul>
<b>Greece</b>	Greek Centre for Missing and Sexually Exploited Children (NGO)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communication with mass media via radio, television and prints</li> <li>• Information gathering from public testimonies (named and anonymous tips)</li> <li>• Transmission of the received information to police authorities</li> <li>• Corporation with national and international external partners (public and private organizations)</li> <li>• Organizing conferences</li> <li>• Launching several activities like the implementation of the 24/7 European 116 000 hotline for missing children and Amber Alert Hellas</li> </ul>
<b>France</b>	Ministry of Justice, Directorate of Criminal Matters and Pardons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Decide whether or not to start Alerte Enlèvement</li> <li>• Creating draft Alerte Enlèvement</li> <li>• Contacting necessary services</li> <li>• Creating crisis cell</li> <li>• Notifying the attaché of the General prosecutor from the Court of Appeal</li> </ul>
<b>UNITED KINGDOM</b>	Missing Persons (non-departmental public body)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Co-ordination of the United Kingdom Child Rescue Alert</li> <li>• Assisting and supporting force trainings on missing and unidentified case investigations</li> <li>• Providing publicity for disappeared children in co-ordination with several partners (media, stores...)</li> <li>• Comparing and disseminating good practices</li> <li>• Exchanging information connected with the search for all child disappearances on a national and international basis</li> <li>• Managing the UK website “Missing Kids” which is a part of the Global Missing Children’s Network</li> <li>• Promoting International Missing Children’s Day so people get aware of the phenomena</li> </ul>

Alert SYSTEM	TARGET GROUP	EXTERNAL PARTNERS
Under construction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Runaways</li> <li>• Parental Abduction</li> <li>• Abductions by third parties</li> <li>• Unaccompanied foreign minors</li> <li>• Undefined disappearances</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Local police</li> <li>• Federal Police</li> <li>• Public prosecutor</li> <li>• Federal prosecutor</li> <li>• Structural partners</li> <li>• Volunteers</li> <li>• Media</li> <li>• International organizations</li> </ul>
Amber Alert Hellas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stranger abductions</li> <li>• Non-custodial parental abductions</li> <li>• Runaways</li> <li>• Child victims of trafficking or Unaccompanied Minors</li> <li>• Lost, missing or otherwise injured children</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Greek National Police</li> <li>• Public prosecutor for minors</li> <li>• Public/private organizations</li> <li>• Volunteers</li> <li>• Mass media</li> <li>• International organizations</li> </ul>
Alerte Enlèvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Runaways</li> <li>• Worrying disappearances</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Public prosecutorProsecutor</li> <li>• French police forces</li> <li>• Private associations</li> <li>• Media</li> <li>• International organizations</li> </ul>
Child Alert Rescue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parental Abductions</li> <li>• Abductions by other persons</li> </ul> <p>The offences are grouped into 4 main types:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parental child abductions: kidnapping of a child by a parent or guardian</li> <li>• Stranger attempted child abductions: kidnappings by someone unknown to the child + the abduction wasn't successful</li> <li>• Stranger successful child abductions: kidnappings by someone not known to the child that succeeded</li> <li>• Other: successful and attempted abductions of a child by an individual that had previous relations with the child</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Police forces</li> <li>• Several governmental agencies</li> <li>• NGO's</li> <li>• Media</li> <li>• International organizations</li> </ul>

COUNTRY	ORGANIZATION	CONTRIBUTION IN DISAPPEARANCE CASES
<b>Netherlands</b>	Korps Landelijke Politiediensten, Landelijk Bureau Vermiste Personen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide support to regional police forces</li> <li>• Investigate disappearance cases</li> <li>• Managing several systems by which they can locate persons in the Netherlands including the National Schengen Information System (NSIS), Opsporingsregister OPS (search system), Vermiste Personen Systeem VPS (missing persons system)</li> </ul>
<b>Germany</b>	Initiatieve Vermiste Kinder (NGO)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing prevention methods, strategies, encouragement, legal measures and support towards police investigations concerning child disappearances, abductions and exploitation of minors. They make use of the internet (e.g. Second Life) and software possibilities to meet these standards.</li> <li>• Ensuring free of charge support and guidance to under age victims and their families.</li> </ul>

Alert SYSTEM	TARGET GROUP	EXTERNAL PARTNERS
Amber Alert	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High-risk cases: these files involve missing persons who are in a life threatening situation, are young and/or did not leave voluntarily</li> <li>• Low-risk cases: these files involve missing persons who probably left voluntarily and are not likely to run serious risks</li> <li>• Absconders</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Private organization "Netpresenter"</li> <li>• Other private organizations</li> <li>• Media</li> <li>• International organizations</li> </ul>
Amber Alarm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Runaways (from home or an institution)</li> <li>• Inexplicable abductions</li> <li>• Parental abductions</li> <li>• Abductions from strangers</li> <li>• International abductions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Landespolizei</li> <li>• Weisser Ring (NGO)</li> <li>• Stroër Infoscreen</li> <li>• e110</li> <li>• International associations</li> </ul>

<b>COUNTRY</b>	<b>WHO DECIDES TO LAUNCH A PUBLIC INFORMATION CAMPAIGN?</b>
<b>Belgium</b>	The police officer that made a report of the disappearance ⇒ his decision can be supported by the Missing Persons Unit of the Federal Police ⇒ when the nature of the disappearance is uncertain the file will go to the magistrate & the Public prosecutor always has the final say
<b>Greece</b>	Missing persons Unit
<b>France</b>	Public prosecutor

WHICH CASES COME INTO ACCOUNT FOR A PUBLIC INFORMATION CAMPAIGN?	USED CHANNELS AND INSTRUMENTS
<p><b>Ministerial Guideline for the tracing of missing persons:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The missing person is younger than 13 years old</li> <li>• The missing person is physically or mentally handicapped or lacks the necessary ability to take care for him/herself</li> <li>• The missing person is dependant on medication or medical treatment</li> <li>• The missing person may find himself in a situation that is life-threatening for him or her</li> <li>• The missing person may find himself accompanied by third parties who could threaten his wellbeing or is a victim of a crime</li> <li>• The absence of the young person is in contradiction to his/her normal behaviour</li> </ul> <p>+ Guideline Child Focus: The disappearance is always considered serious if a child has not returned after a period of thirty days</p>	<p><b>Structural and voluntary partners:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Posters (digital and/or paper)</li> <li>• Vignettes</li> <li>• Internet</li> </ul> <p><b>Media:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Television</li> <li>• Radio</li> <li>• Internet</li> <li>• Newspapers</li> <li>• Online media</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The missing person must be a minor</li> <li>• The health or life of the child must be in imminent danger</li> <li>• Standard information about the case must be available in order to launch an Amber Alert</li> <li>• Police authorities must decide that public information release does not endanger the safety of the child</li> <li>• The intention to use an Amber Alert is aimed at assisting the investigation in locating the missing youngster</li> </ul>	<p><b>Structural and voluntary partners:</b></p> <p>Posters (digital and/or paper)  Flyers  SMS  Message boards (highways, airports...)</p> <p><b>Media:</b></p> <p>Television  Radio  Internet  Online media</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not all child disappearances come into account. The child must have been kidnapped recently</li> <li>• The physical integrity or the life of the victim is in danger</li> <li>• There're good reasons to assume that launching an alert can obtain testimonies from witnesses that can lead to the location of the missing youngster or to the perpetrator Authorities must be in possession of useful data (for example a description of the victim) that can be disseminated to the public</li> <li>• The victim is younger than 18 years old</li> </ul>	<p><b>Structural partners:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Companies in charge of the highways</li> <li>• Transport agencies, i.e. the 'Société Nationale de Chemins de Fer Français' (SNCF) and the 'Régie Autonome des Transports Parisiens' (RATP)</li> </ul> <p><b>Media:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Television channels, i.e. TF1, France 2, France 3, M6...</li> <li>• Radio stations: public and private broadcasts</li> </ul>

<b>COUNTRY</b>	<b>WHO DECIDES TO LAUNCH A PUBLIC INFORMATION CAMPAIGN?</b>
<b>UNITED KINGDOM</b>	The SIO (Senior Investigating Officer), the Gold Commander or ACPO (Association of Chief Police Officers) officer should ratify the call to launch
<b>Netherlands</b>	Korps Landelijke Politiediensten, Landelijk Bureau Vermiste Personen
<b>Germany</b>	Landespolizei



WHICH CASES COME INTO ACCOUNT FOR A PUBLIC INFORMATION CAMPAIGN?	USED CHANNELS AND INSTRUMENTS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The child is under 18 years old</li> <li>• There is reason to believe that the child has been abducted, kidnapped or taken under the influence of a third party: this applies for parental-and stranger abductions</li> <li>• There is reason to believe that the child is in imminent danger of serious harm (physical or psychological) or death</li> <li>• There is sufficient information available to enable the public to assist the police in locating the child</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Media</li> <li>• Citizens</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The child must be younger than 18 years</li> <li>• There's an immediate danger to the child's life or there's a serious threat to the child's well being</li> <li>• A photo of the child must be available as well as sufficient information</li> <li>• Data of the missing child must be included in the National Schengen Information System (NSIS) as soon as possible together with the request for the tracing and repatriation of the minor</li> </ul>	<p><b>Partnership with citizens</b> ⇒ people can choose between several instruments (or register on all of them) on which they can receive an alert:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• On a personal computer: e-mail, instant messenger, pop-up alert, screensavers, twitter and RSS-feed</li> <li>• On a mobile phone: owners of a mobile phone can send a free of charge text message to the number 8844 by which they register themselves</li> <li>• On a (personal/professional) website: Banner (Hyves/Google), RSS-feed, twitter, website alert</li> <li>• On a plasma/LCD screen: placed in visible locations including schools, libraries, offices, stores...</li> </ul> <p><b>Media:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Television</li> <li>• Online media</li> </ul> <p><b>Structural/voluntary partners:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Posters campaigns</li> <li>• Internet</li> </ul> <p>Anyone can download the Amber Alert logo for free by which the system can be promoted or supported throughout the Netherlands</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The investigators have concrete indications that an abduction took place</li> <li>• The missing child is 17 years or younger</li> <li>• The case is reported at a local police station</li> <li>• The police investigators assume the missing youngster is in physical danger or in a life-threatening situation</li> <li>• There must be enough information available concerning the description of the abducted child and the circumstances in which s/he disappeared</li> </ul>	<p><b>Partnership with citizens</b> ⇒ people can chose between instruments (or register on all of them) on which they can receive an alert:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• On a mobile phone</li> <li>• Fax</li> </ul> <p>Private organization "Stroër Infoscreens" (digital billboards)</p>

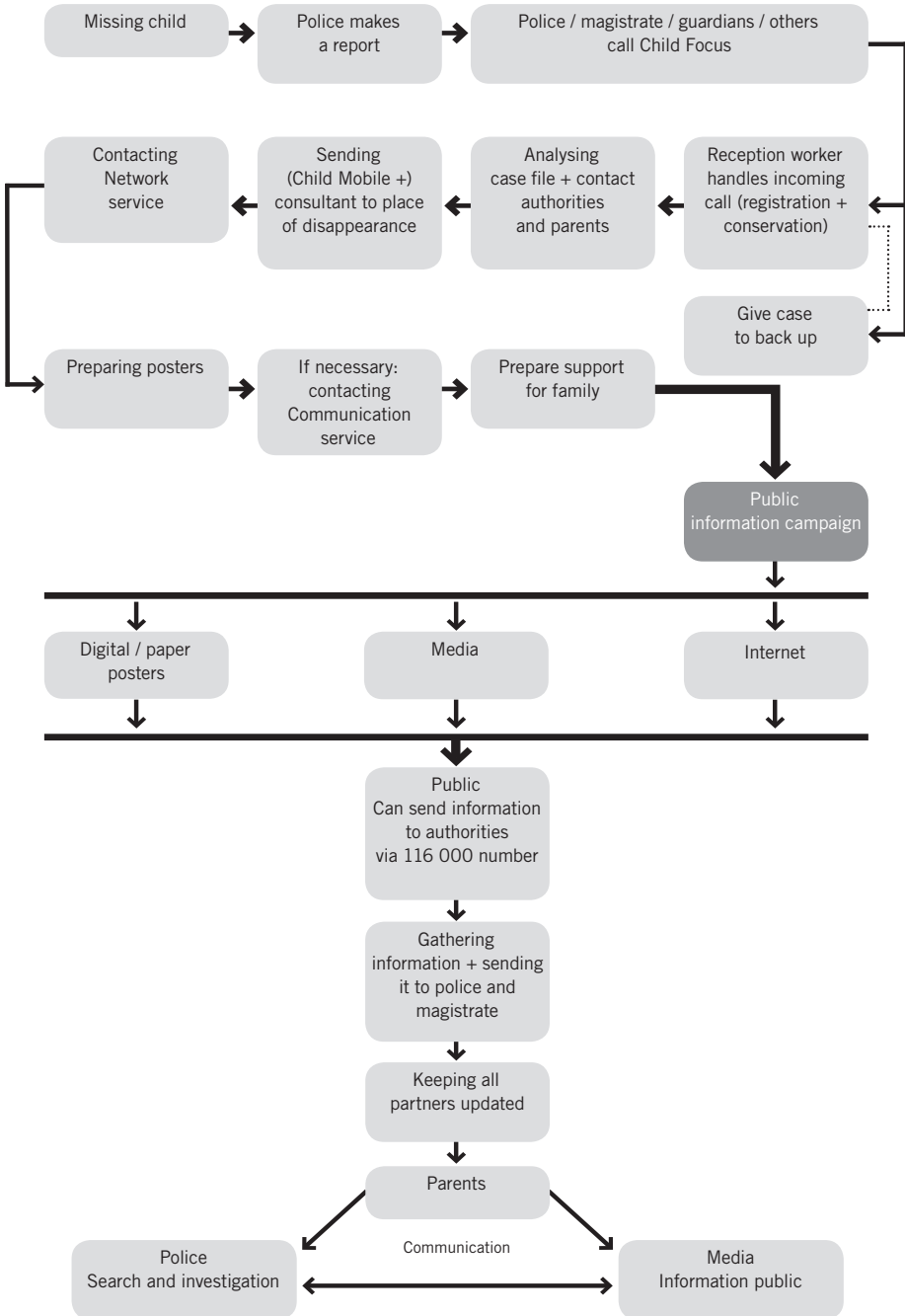
## APPENDIX 7: OVERVIEW PROS AND CONS EU CHILD ALERT SYSTEMS

COUNTRY	STRENGTHS
<b>France</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Involving the French population into the investigation</li> </ul>
<b>Greece</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Involving public rapidly into the investigation</li> <li>• Not only for stranger abductions, but also for other life-threatening cases</li> <li>• Structured agreements: the Greek police decides to launch, the Greek centre controls the alert system</li> <li>• People who do not want to go to the police can contact the NGO</li> <li>• The format of the message is practical and easy ⇒ structured partners can implement it effectively</li> </ul>
<b>United Kingdom</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The national operated system is coordinated</li> <li>• Protocols with the media</li> <li>• The alert procedures are written out</li> <li>• The NPIA provides advice and information</li> <li>• National police forces use the system sufficiently</li> </ul>
<b>The Netherlands</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The efficiency of the system</li> <li>• Amber Alerts are rarely used, which increases public attention</li> <li>• The area of dissemination can expand at any time</li> <li>• An alert can create a 'shock effect' by which people will be motivated to participate in the investigation</li> <li>• The focussed target group: people respond towards child disappearances</li> <li>• Many people are registered in the alert system which suggests that citizens are willing to participate</li> <li>• An Amber Alert creates a 'network effect'</li> </ul>
<b>Germany</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• An alert system works fast and effective</li> <li>• It can be used locally and nationally</li> <li>• It takes the shifting of search areas into account</li> <li>• Citizens can visualize the missing child</li> <li>• It's a free of charge service</li> <li>• The system is not complicated to use</li> <li>• Amber Alarm is accessible to all people</li> </ul>

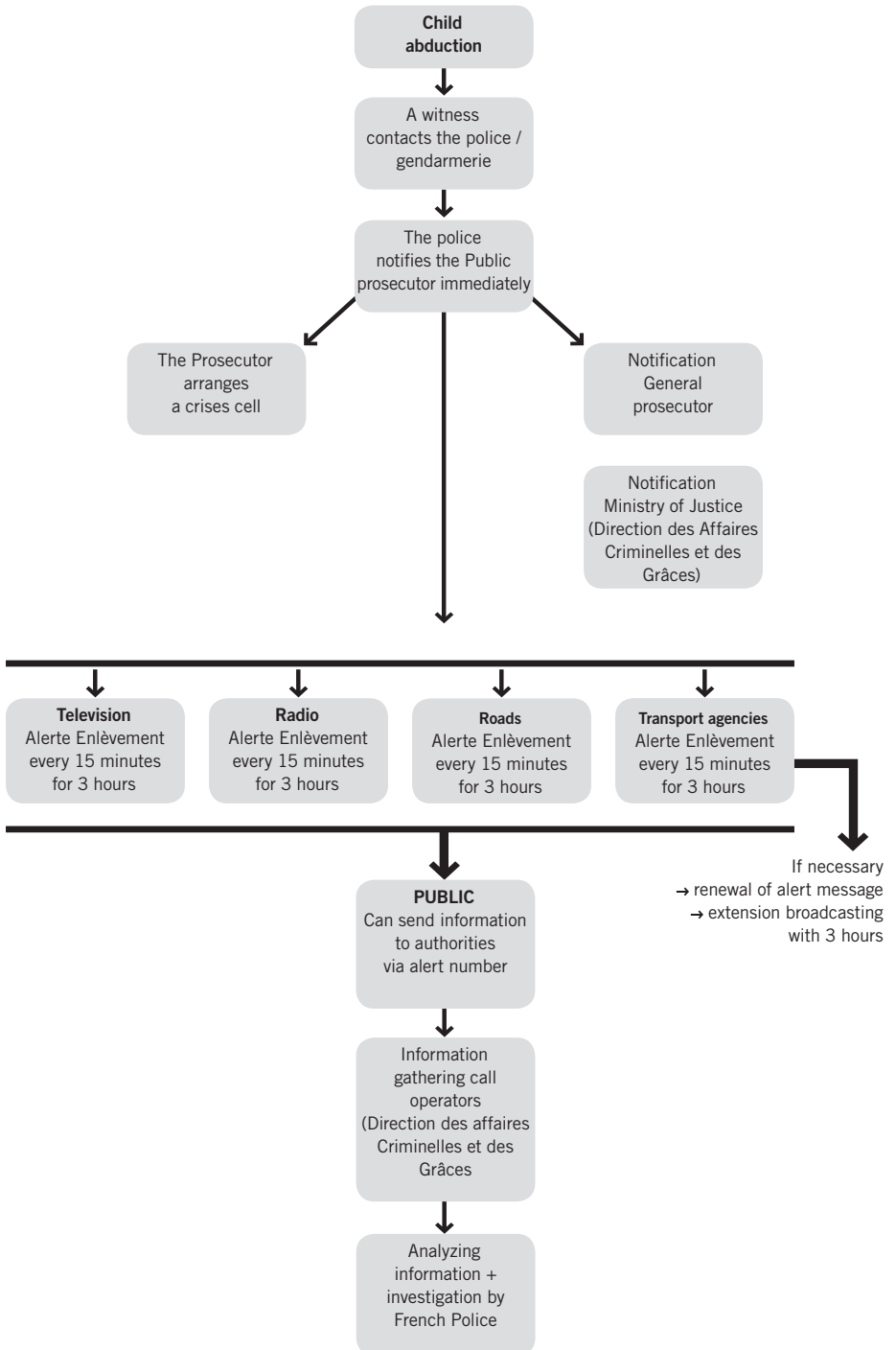
WEAKNESSES	ADVISABLE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The limited cases in which an alert is possible</li> <li>• The various means that are necessary in order to have an effective launch</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do not limit the criteria to abduction cases only</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The operational control of the alert system is manual</li> <li>• Training the operators of the system regularly since an Amber Alert occurs rarely</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create enough publicity about the aim of a Child Alert</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The age regulation</li> <li>• Local police forces do not always use the alert program properly</li> <li>• Abductions are not common by which police forces do not always know what to do</li> <li>• Child Rescue Alert currently does not implement means of social media or online media</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Examine alert models in other countries and keep the knowledge up to date</li> <li>• Look at national and international systems</li> <li>• Find a balance between strict dissemination criteria and a flexible usage of the system</li> <li>• Arrange efficient agreements with the media</li> <li>• Create a strong system so people will respond</li> <li>• Be aware of financial costs</li> <li>• Make sure that local forces are aware of the existence of the system</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There used to be technological difficulties</li> <li>• It could be used more often</li> <li>• The assessment of a 'worrying child disappearance' is difficult to decide within a short period of time</li> <li>• The system is costly</li> <li>• Not enough focus on European collaboration possibilities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The criteria to launch an alert should be clear</li> <li>• Do not enlarge the criteria</li> <li>• Spend enough attention towards the technological infrastructure of the system</li> <li>• Foresee a flexible system that takes into account the possible expansion of search areas</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The dissemination instruments are limited: an SMS or a fax cannot describe the missing person as good as a photo</li> <li>• Amber Alarm is primarily used by individuals and not so much by companies</li> <li>• Collaboration possibilities with police services are dispersed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create enough network wherein various structured and voluntary partners participate</li> <li>• Foresee effective collaboration possibilities with the police</li> <li>• Implement effective dissemination instruments</li> </ul>

## APPENDIX 8: FLOW CHARTS EU CHILD ALERT SYSTEMS

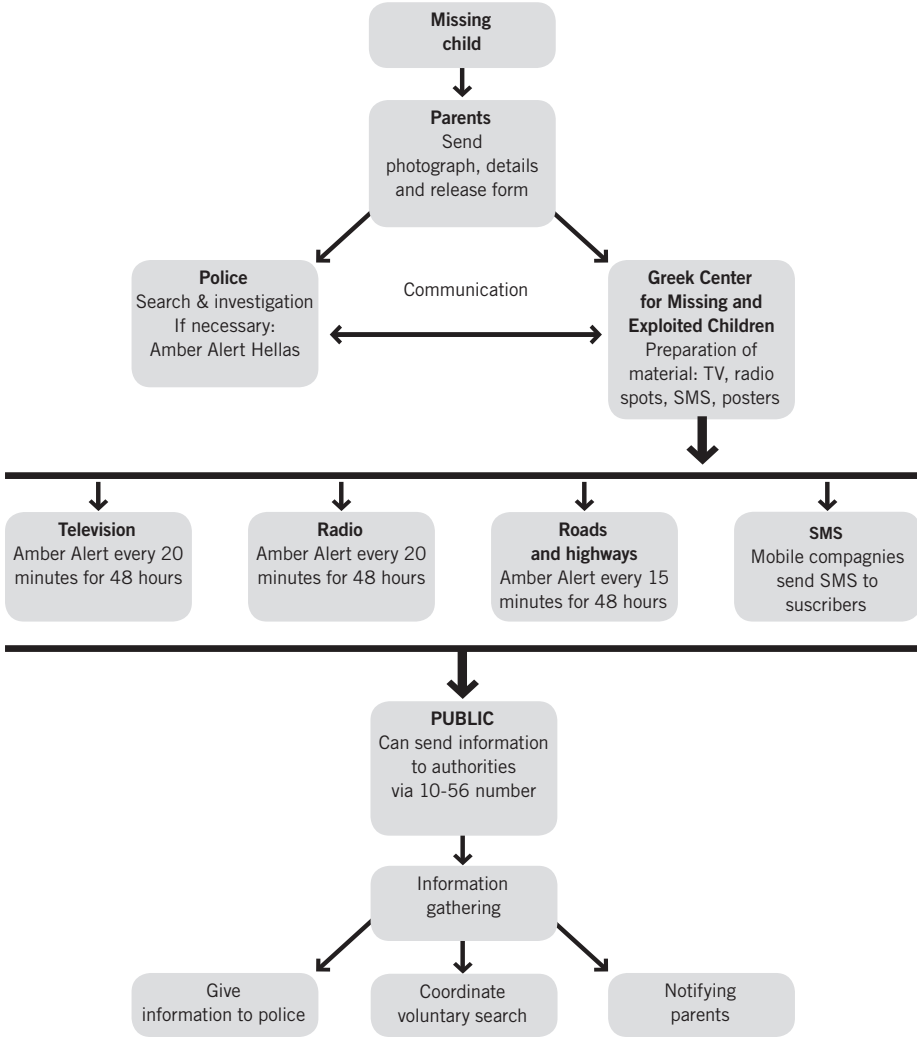
### Process information dissemination – Belgium



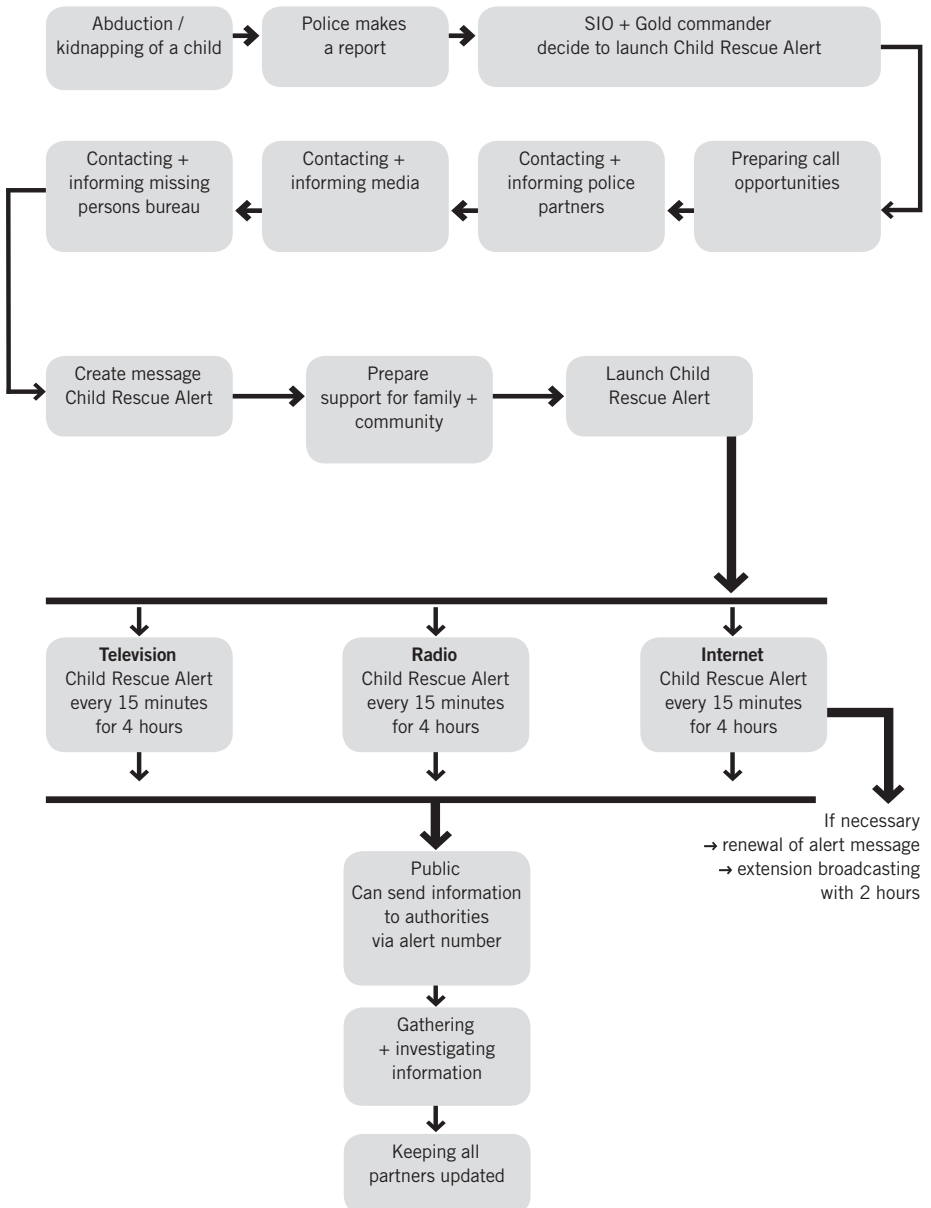
## Process Alerte Enlèvement – France



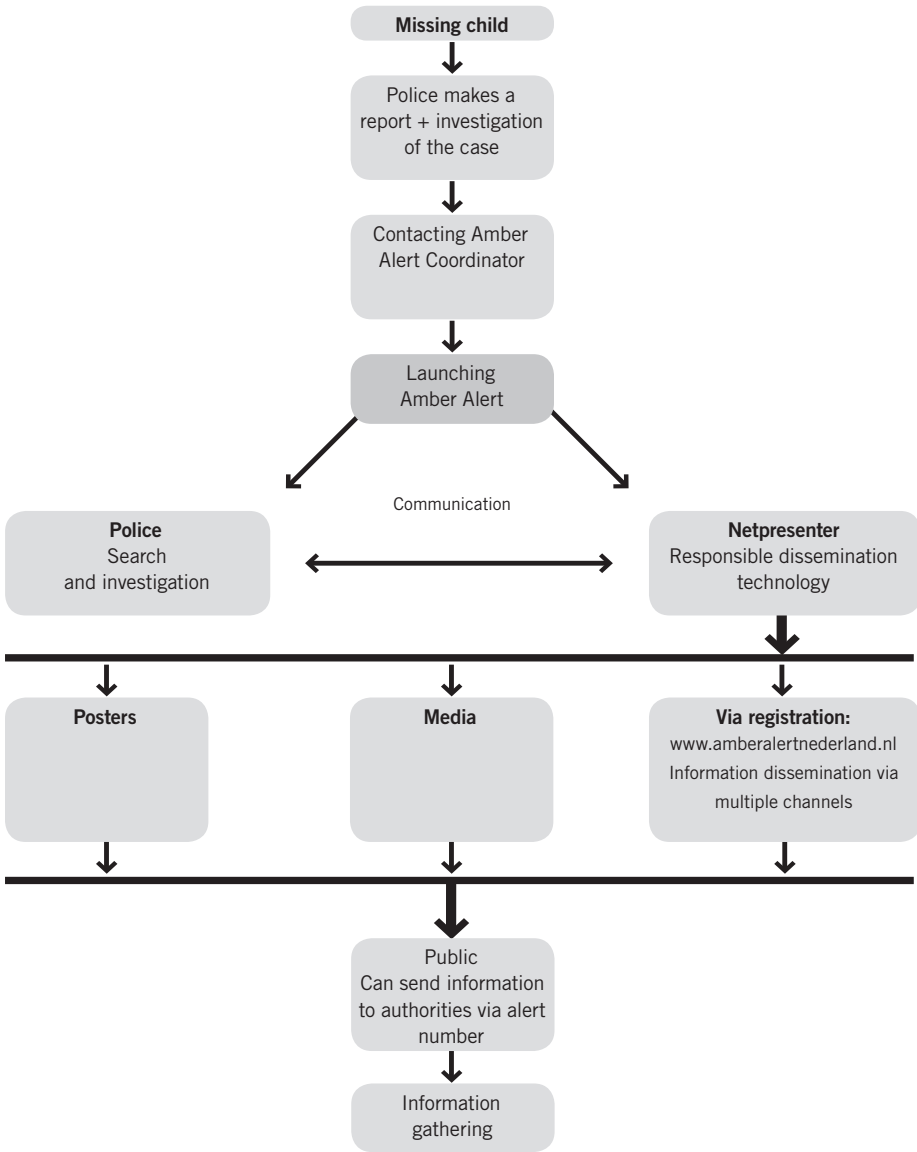
**Process Amber Alert Hellas – Greece**



## Process Child Rescue Alert – United Kingdom

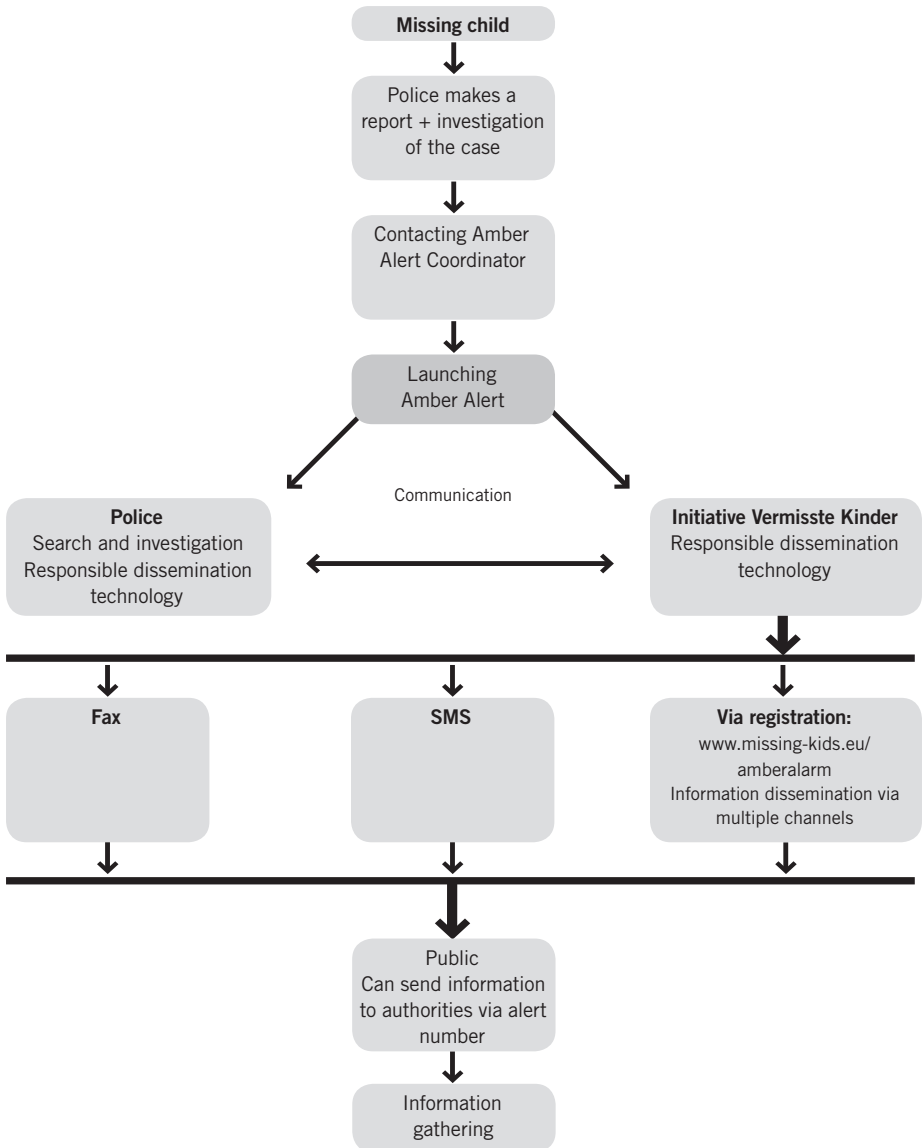


**Process Amber Alert – The Netherlands**





## Process Amber Alarm – Germany



## Research Report

# “Child Alert”: public information dissemination of child disappearances

Child alert systems are modes and models of broadcasting and disseminating information in order to involve the public to obtain useful information on worrying child and adolescent disappearances. Worldwide different countries are creating Child Alert systems or already have one (e.g. Canada, Australia, Malaysia...). Developments are taking form in Europe too. Countries like France and Greece already have realised national systems a few years ago.

During the period 2010-2011, with support of the European Commission – DG Justice, the Belgian NGO Child Focus, responsible for disseminating information of child disappearances, works in corporation with relevant stakeholders on the creation of a Belgian Child Alert system. This system is mainly oriented towards extremely worrying child disappearances. The main objective of the Child Alert Belgium project is to develop a technological up to date and flexible warning system enabling cross-border collaboration. This project forms the background of this six-month explorative research (February-August 2010).

The Criminology Department of the “Vrije Universiteit Brussel” compared Child Focus’ current dissemination process with five European Child Alert systems (France, Germany, Greece, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom). The analysis aims at describing the experiences with these systems and aims at drawing lessons that could be considered in the design of the Belgian Child Alert system, including cross-border issues. The research uses a context-sensitive analysis, taking into account the local conditions, rules, regulations and stakeholders involved.

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Research Group  
Social Analysis  
of Security



child focus



Missing  
Children  
Europe



FEDERALE DIENST  
Voor de  
Justitie



openbaar ministerie  
ministère public  
Staatsanwaltschaft



Federal Public Service  
Justice

