



HJ 1: A STUDY OF MISSING YOUTH

FINAL REPORT TO THE 69TH
MONTANA LEGISLATURE

State-Tribal Relations Committee
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This report is a summary of the work of the State-Tribal Relations

Committee, specific to the State-Tribal Relation Committee’s 2023-2024 study of missing youth as outlined in the State-Tribal Relations Committee’s 2023-24 work plan and House Joint Resolution 1 (2023). Members received additional information and public testimony on the subject, and this report is an effort to highlight key information and the processes followed by the State-Tribal Relations Committee in reaching its conclusions. To review additional information, including audio minutes, and exhibits, visit the State-Tribal Relations Committee website: www.leg.mt.gov/strc

A full report, including links to the documents referenced in this print report, is available at the State-Tribal Relations Committee website: <https://leg.mt.gov/committees/interim/strc>

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OVERVIEW

[House Joint Resolution No. 1](#), assigned to the State-Tribal Relations Committee (STRC) for the 2023-2024 interim, requested a study of missing youth in Montana. The missing youth study ranked number four out of six in a list of proposed study resolutions. HJ 1 centered around the statement that “80% of all missing persons in Montana are youth under 18 years of age.” It asked why youth make up such a high percentage of missing persons in the state, how that number can be reduced, and how missing youth can be quickly located.

STUDY PROCESS

The STRC’s study process involved examining current statistical information about missing youth compiled by Montana Department of Justice (DOJ), inviting DOJ staff to expand on that information in two separate committee meetings, and gaining a better understanding of collaboration between the DOJ and the Child and Family Services Division (CFSD) of the Department of Public Health and Human Services (DPHHS). The STRC also asked for research comparing Montana missing youth statistics to other states and to the nation, as well as preventative measures for youth who run away.

At its first meeting in July 2023, STRC members considered the committee’s long history of work on missing persons in Montana. Since the 2017-2018 interim, the STRC has received information from state agencies and private entities, conducted roundtables, compiled reports, and sponsored legislation in relation to missing persons. [That work](#) centered primarily on missing indigenous persons.

In July, the committee [received statistical information](#) from DOJ related to missing youth in the state, and they heard updates from DOJ staff about the Montana Missing Indigenous Persons (MMIP) Task Force and the Looping in Native Communities (LINC) grants. Members heard that Native American youth are more likely to be reported missing, that most missing youth are ages 11 and older, and that the high percentage of missing youth in comparison to other age groups is usually related to multiple reports for a single person. Those repeat reports are almost always cases of youth who have run away.

At its October meeting, DOJ staff provided more [statistical information](#) to members and explained their collaboration efforts with the CFSD. Nearly every month, the DOJ Missing Persons Specialist and the Office of Child and Family Ombudsman meet with staff from CFSD to [review reports of missing youth in Montana](#). The goals of the meetings are to cross-check every youth reported missing across the two agency databases and to review all individual cases to close communication gaps and remove youth who have been located but are still listed as missing. The Missing Persons Specialist notifies local law enforcement about cases of located youth. There are typically several names on the list each month. DOJ staff reported that there are usually a few youths on the list each month who have been located but not yet removed from the Missing Person Clearinghouse by the reporting law enforcement agency.

DOJ staff also stressed that youth who receive assistance from CFSD, including those who are in foster care, do not have disproportionately higher rates of missing person reports compared to other youths in Montana. A [report](#) from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Inspector General shows that of the more than 1,000,000 children in foster care in the nation from July 2018 through December 2020, approximately 4% were reported missing one or more times. In 2023, the number of youths in foster care who were reported missing in Montana each month averaged less than 0.5% of the total youths in foster care in the state.

FINDINGS

The committee did not develop any formal recommendations or legislation for the 2025 Legislature. However, some information may be useful for future studies or legislation related to missing youth.

- The 80% figure the study is centered on seems to come from data from the Montana DOJ from 2017-2019. As of 2024, Montana's percentage of missing youths in relation to total missing persons (approximately 70%) is comparable to other states and the nation. For example, [Idaho reported](#) around 72% of their missing persons reports in 2023 were youths under the age of 18. According to the FBI's National Crime Information Center (NCIC) database [statistics for 2022](#), approximately 66% (about 359,000) of more than 546,000 missing persons reports were for juveniles up to age 17.
- Youth served by Montana's Child and Family Services Division make up a small percentage of total missing youth reports.
- There are more reports of missing indigenous youth than nonindigenous youth in Montana.
- Less than 1% of missing youth reports in Montana are listed as abductions (either by a family member or a nonfamily member). That figure is comparable to national numbers.
- Across all demographic categories and locations, most missing youth are ages 15-17, which aligns with other states and the nation.
- Nearly all youth reported missing more than once are individuals who have run away.
- The high percentage of missing persons under age 18 in comparison to other age groups is directly related to youth who run away.
- The DOJ reports that missing persons in Montana are located at a rate of nearly 99% and that 73% of all persons reported missing in the state in 2023 were resolved within one week.
- Studies such as the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) [Runaway Youth Report](#), conducted by the Montana Office of Public Instruction (OPI), show that youth who run away are at higher risks for drug abuse, mental health issues, and family problems.
- There is no simple way to reduce the number of missing youths in Montana or elsewhere, though there are some potential steps that may alleviate the issue:
 - Taking preventative measures, such as early screenings and referrals to resources, to locate and assist youths who are at higher risk for running away.
 - Conducting localized studies of regions or communities in Montana with high or low numbers of missing youth reports.

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- Working to streamline reporting processes across the state to prevent delayed reports and nonreporting, such as an individual law enforcement officer deciding not to report a runaway youth as missing, and to increase public access to real-time missing persons information.
- Increasing public awareness about local, state, and national resources (both in person and online) for missing youth and families.

APPENDIX A: STATE-TRIBAL RELATIONS COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Before the close of each legislative session, House and Senate leadership appoint lawmakers to interim committees. The members of the State-Tribal Relations Committee, like most other interim committees, serve one 20-month term. Members who are reelected to the Legislature, subject to overall term limits and if appointed, may serve again on an interim committee. This information is included in order to comply with 2-15-155, MCA.

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