

# National Center for Missing & Exploited Children®

## 2018 AMBER Alert Report

Analysis of AMBER Alert Cases in 2018



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## Introduction

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

This program was eventually taken to the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children®, known as NCMEC, with a request for a national initiative. It then became known as America's Missing: Broadcast Emergency Response or the AMBER Plan, which allows broadcasters and transportation authorities to immediately distribute information about recent child abductions to the public and enables the entire community to assist in the search for, and safe recovery, of the child. What began as a local effort in the Dallas-Fort Worth, Texas, area has grown into a seamless system of such programs in every state across the country. Each year these alerts help safely recover abducted children. Since the inception of the program in 1996, through Dec. 31, 2018, 956 children have been safely recovered specifically as a result of an AMBER Alert being issued.

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

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

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

<sup>1</sup>*National Strategy*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, [www.amberalert.gov/ntl\\_strategy.htm](http://www.amberalert.gov/ntl_strategy.htm), accessed Feb. 26, 2019.

## AMBER Alert Definitions

This report presents information about AMBER Alerts issued in the 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands from Jan. 1, 2018, through Dec. 31, 2018, and intaked by NCMEC. Although an AMBER Alert case may be activated in multiple areas, this report only accounts for alerts in the state/territory of first activation. This report analyzes cases according to the case type for which the AMBER Alert was issued, not the case type at the time of recovery.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

- Returns home to his or her parent or legal guardian.
- Remains in the custody of law enforcement.
- Is in contact with his or her parent or legal guardian, but will not be returning home and the parents or legal guardian and law enforcement are satisfied with the situation.

A child's case is only labeled recovered/deceased by NCMEC if a body has been found and positively identified.

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

**Summary of AMBER Alerts**

From Jan. 1, 2018, to Dec. 31, 2018, 161 AMBER Alerts were issued in the U.S. involving 203 children.

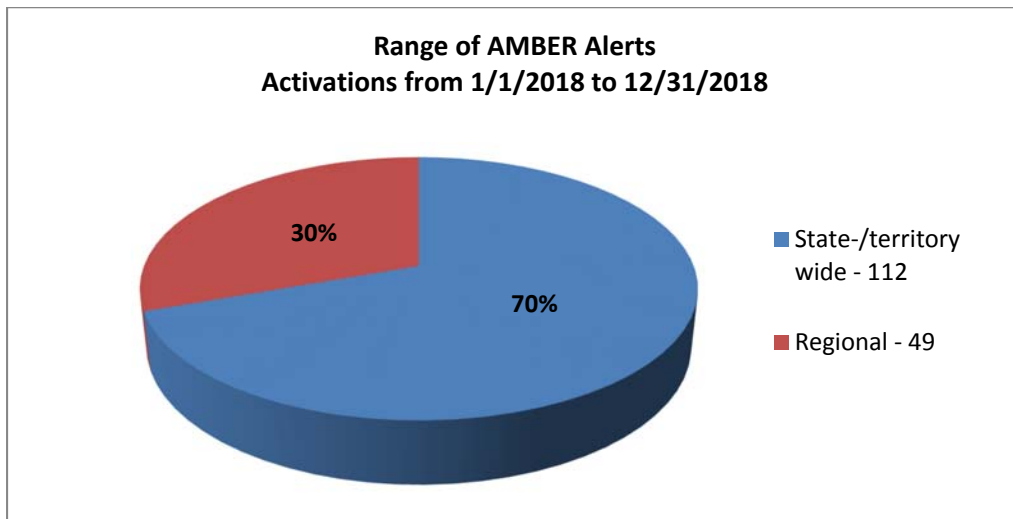
At the time the AMBER Alert cases were intaked at NCMEC, there were 97 FAs, 56 NFAs, six LIMs, and two ERUs. Eleven cases were later determined to be hoaxes, and 12 cases were later determined to be unfounded.

Of the 161 AMBER Alerts issued from Jan. 1, 2018, to Dec. 31, 2018, 155 cases resulted in a recovery, 28 of which were successfully recovered as a direct result of an AMBER Alert being issued. As of Feb. 26, 2019, when statistics for this report were finalized, for the AMBER Alerts issued in 2018, 11 children remained actively missing and seven children were located deceased.

**AMBER Alerts by Range**

In 2018, 70 percent (n=112) of AMBER Alerts were issued state-/territory wide, 30 percent (n=49) of AMBER Alerts were issued regionally, and no AMBER Alerts were issued locally.

**Figure 1: Range of AMBER Alerts**



**AMBER Alerts by State/Territory**

From Jan. 1, 2018, to Dec. 31, 2018, 161 AMBER Alerts were issued in 37 states. Texas issued the most AMBER Alerts with 14 percent (n=23) followed by Ohio with 9 percent (n=15).



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

State/Territory	Number of alerts	Percent
Texas	23	14
Ohio	15	9
California	11	7
Florida and New York	9 each	6 each
Colorado and North Carolina	7 each	4 each
Oklahoma, Tennessee, and Virginia	6 each	4 each
Arizona and Arkansas	5 each	3 each
Georgia, Michigan, and Washington	4 each	2 each
Illinois, Kansas, Louisiana, Maryland, and Missouri	3 each	2 each
Alabama, Idaho, Indiana, Iowa, Mississippi, Montana, West Virginia, and Wisconsin	2 each	1 each
Connecticut, Minnesota, Nebraska, New Jersey, New Mexico, North Dakota, South Carolina, Utah, and Wyoming	1 each	1 each
Alaska, Delaware, District of Columbia, Hawaii, Kentucky, Maine, Massachusetts, Nevada, New Hampshire, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Puerto Rico, Rhode Island, South Dakota, U.S. Virgin Islands, and Vermont	0 each	0 each
<b>Total</b>	<b>161</b>	<b>~100</b>

**Multistate/Territory AMBER Alerts**

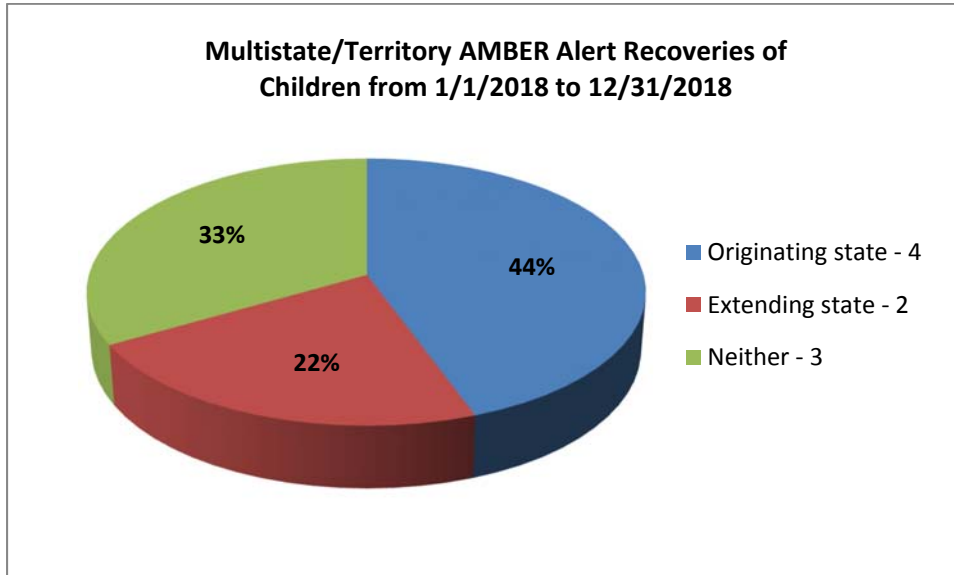
When an AMBER Alert is issued, an abductor may take the child outside the jurisdiction of the issuing law enforcement authority. In some cases, the AMBER Alert coordinator in the state/territory where the AMBER Alert originated may request an AMBER Alert be extended into another state/territory. In 2018, seven AMBER Alerts were extended beyond the limits of the state where the AMBER Alert first originated.

**Table 2: List of Multistate/Territory AMBER Alerts**

Originating	Extending
Florida	Georgia
Kansas	Missouri
Louisiana	Mississippi
Michigan	Indiana
Missouri	Kansas
Nebraska	Wyoming
Virginia	North Carolina

In two cases, four children were recovered in the state where the alert originated. In two cases, two children were recovered in the extending state, and in three cases, three children were recovered in neither the originating state nor the extending state.

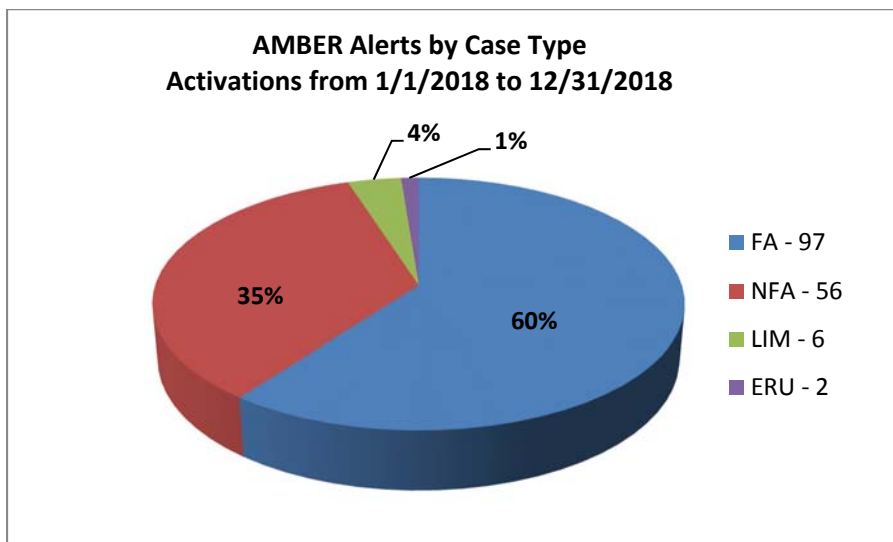
**Figure 2: Multistate/Territory AMBER Alert Recoveries**



**AMBER Alerts by Case Type at Intake**

In 2018, 60 percent (n=97) of AMBER Alert cases were intaked as FAs, 35 percent (n=56) were NFAs, 4 percent (n=6) were LIMs, and 1 percent (n=2) were ERUs.

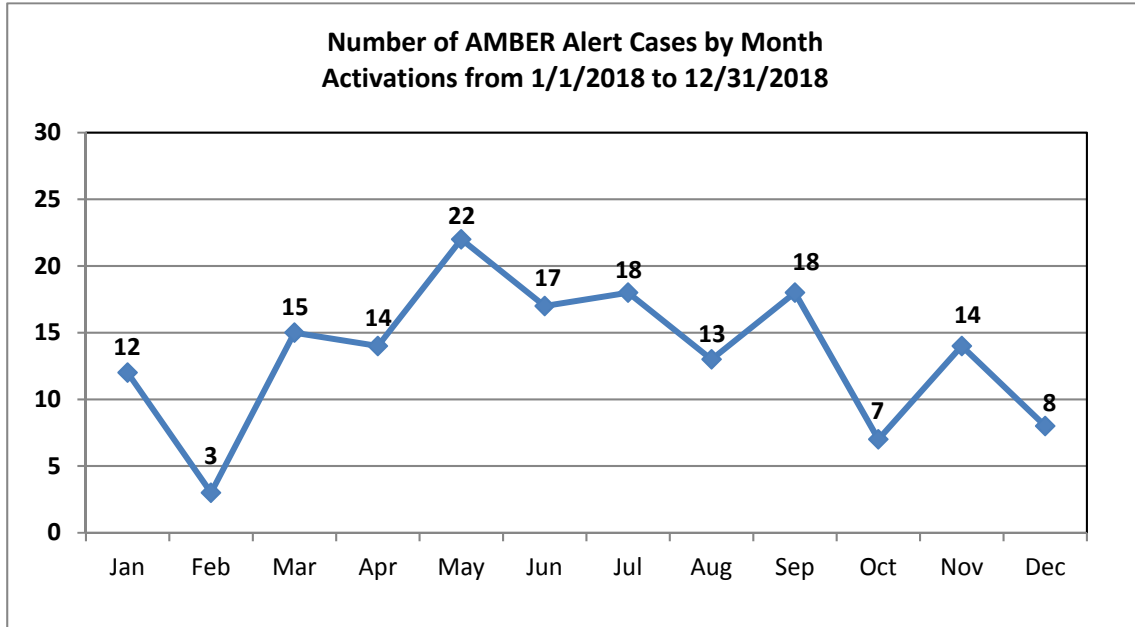
**Figure 3: AMBER Alerts by Case Type**



**Number of Cases by Month**

In 2018, the number of AMBER Alerts issued per month ranged from a low of three in February to a high of 22 in May.

**Figure 4: Number of AMBER Alert Cases by Month**



**Number of Case Types at Intake by Month**

In 2018, AMBER Alerts were issued most frequently for FAs (n=13) in July. The highest number of NFAs (n=8) occurred in June. AMBER Alerts for LIMs (n=3) were the most frequently issued in May. The only Alerts for ERUs (n=1) were issued in March and April.

**Table 3: Number of Case Types by Month**

	FA	NFA	LIM	ERU	Total	Total percent
Jan	7	4	1	0	12	7
Feb	3	0	0	0	3	2
Mar	12	2	0	1	15	9
Apr	7	5	1	1	14	9
May	12	7	3	0	22	14
Jun	9	8	0	0	17	11
Jul	13	5	0	0	18	11
Aug	6	7	0	0	13	8
Sep	12	6	0	0	18	11
Oct	5	1	1	0	7	4
Nov	7	7	0	0	14	9

	FA	NFA	LIM	ERU	Total	Total percent
Dec	4	4	0	0	8	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>97</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>161</b>	<b>100</b>

#### **Number of Children by Case Type at Intake by Month**

In 2018, 203 children were involved in 161 AMBER Alert cases. Sixty-six percent (n=133) of children were intaked as FAs followed by 31 percent (n=62) of children intaked as NFAs. Three percent (n=6) were intaked as LIMs, and 1 percent (n=2) were intaked as ERUs.

Children intaked as FAs were most frequently involved in AMBER Alerts during the month of July (n=20). The highest number of children intaked as NFAs (n=9) occurred in the months of June and November. AMBER Alerts for LIMs (n=3) were most frequently issued in May. Children were only intaked as ERUs (n=1) in the months of March and April.

***Table 4: Number of Children by Case Type by Month***

	FA	NFA	LIM	ERU	Total	Total percent
Jan	7	4	1	0	12	6
Feb	3	0	0	0	3	1
Mar	17	3	0	1	21	10
Apr	11	5	1	1	18	9
May	18	7	3	0	28	14
Jun	14	9	0	0	23	11
Jul	20	6	0	0	26	13
Aug	8	7	0	0	15	7
Sep	17	7	0	0	24	12
Oct	5	1	1	0	7	3
Nov	8	9	0	0	17	8
Dec	5	4	0	0	9	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>133</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>203</b>	<b>~100</b>

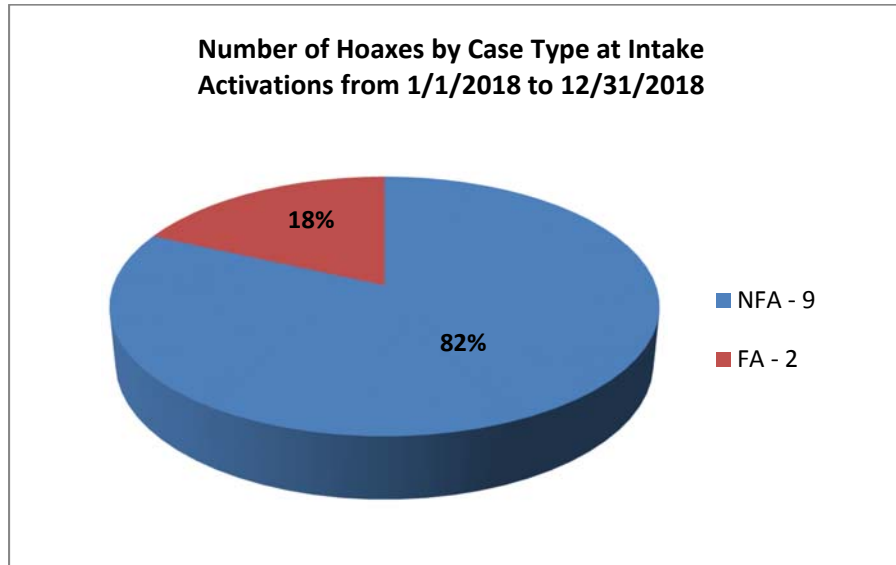
#### **Cases Determined to Be Hoaxes**

A case is determined to be a hoax when either an individual falsely reports a child missing or when a child reports him- or herself missing with the intent of misleading law enforcement.

In 2018, 7 percent (n=11) of AMBER Alerts issued involving 13 children were later determined to be hoaxes. Eighty-two percent (n=9) of hoaxes were originally intaked as NFAs and FAs at 18 percent (n=2).

In 82 percent (n=9) of hoaxes, false information was provided by the child's parent and 9 percent each (n=1 each) was provided by the child's neighbor and uncle.

**Figure 5: Number of Hoaxes by Case Type at Intake**



Of the 11 cases determined to be hoaxes, six cases had known locations from which the children involved were reported missing. Of those cases, 50 percent (n=3) were reported missing from a store and 33 percent (n=2) were reported missing from home. Additionally, 17 percent were reported missing from the street (n=1).

**Children Involved in Hoaxes**

In 2018, 11 AMBER Alerts involving 13 children were later determined to be hoaxes. Fifty-four percent (n=7) of children involved in hoaxes were boys, whereas girls represented 46 percent (n=6) of children involved in hoaxes. Eighty-six percent (n=6) of boys involved in hoaxes were younger than 8. Of the six girls involved in hoaxes, 83 percent (n=5) were younger than 8.

**Table 5: Age and Sex of Children Involved in Hoaxes**

Age	Girls	Boys
<1	1	1
1	1	1
2	0	2
3	0	1
4	0	0
5	1	0
6	1	0
7	1	1
8	0	0
9	0	0
10	0	0
11	0	0

Age	Girls	Boys
12	0	0
13	0	0
14	0	1
15	0	0
16	1	0
17	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>

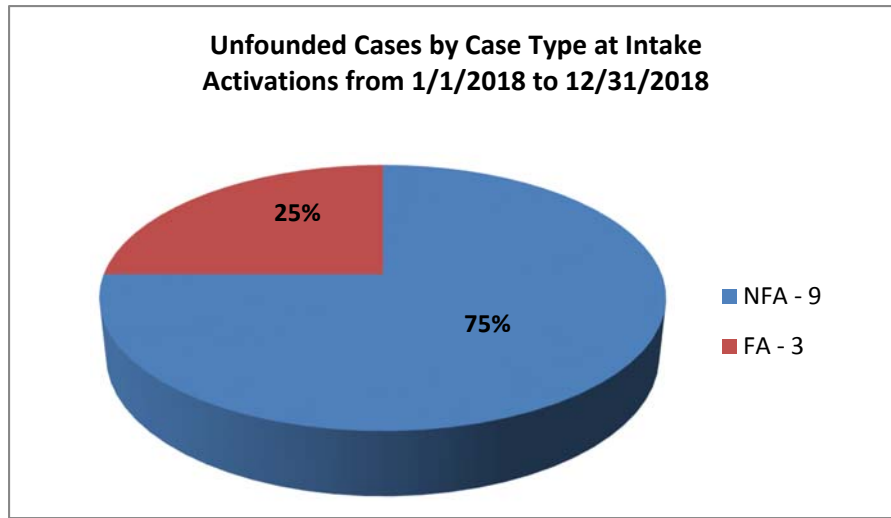
**Table 6: Age and Case Type at Intake of Children Involved in Hoaxes**

Age	FA	NFA	LIM	ERU
<1	0	2	0	0
1	0	2	0	0
2	0	2	0	0
3	0	1	0	0
4	0	0	0	0
5	1	0	0	0
6	0	1	0	0
7	2	0	0	0
8	0	0	0	0
9	0	0	0	0
10	0	0	0	0
11	0	0	0	0
12	0	0	0	0
13	0	0	0	0
14	0	1	0	0
15	0	0	0	0
16	0	1	0	0
17	0	0	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>

**Cases Determined to Be Unfounded**

A case is determined to be unfounded when a child is reported missing based on available information at the time, but the investigation determines a child was never missing. Twelve AMBER Alerts involving 14 children were determined to be unfounded, representing 7 percent of the total number of AMBER Alerts issued in 2018. These unfounded cases were originally intaked as NFAs at 75 percent (n=9) and FAs at 25 percent (n=3).

**Figure 6: Unfounded Cases by Case Type at Intake**



**Children Involved in Unfounded Cases**

In 2018, 12 AMBER Alerts involving 14 children were later determined to be unfounded. Boys represented 64 percent (n=9) whereas girls represented 36 percent (n=5) of all children involved in unfounded cases. Of the nine boys involved in unfounded cases, 56 percent (n=5) ranged from 2 to 7 years of age. Of the five girls involved in unfounded cases, three were between the ages of 15 and 17.

**Table 7: Age and Sex of Children Involved in Unfounded Cases**

Age	Girls	Boys
<1	1	0
1	0	0
2	0	2
3	0	0
4	0	0
5	0	1
6	1	1
7	0	1
8	0	0
9	0	1
10	0	0
11	0	1
12	0	0
13	0	0
14	0	0
15	1	0
16	1	1

Age	Girls	Boys
17	1	0
Unknown	0	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>9</b>

**Table 8: Age and Case Type at Intake of Children Involved in Unfounded Cases**

Age	NFA	FA	LIM	ERU
<1	0	1	0	0
1	0	0	0	0
2	2	0	0	0
3	0	0	0	0
4	0	0	0	0
5	0	1	0	0
6	1	1	0	0
7	1	0	0	0
8	0	0	0	0
9	0	1	0	0
10	0	0	0	0
11	1	0	0	0
12	0	0	0	0
13	0	0	0	0
14	0	0	0	0
15	1	0	0	0
16	2	0	0	0
17	1	0	0	0
Unknown	1	0	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>

### **Secondary Distribution of AMBER Alerts**

The AMBER Alert Secondary Distribution system, known as AASD, is comprised of wireless carriers, internet service providers, digital signage, social networking websites, content providers, and major retailers who distribute AMBER Alerts to a geographically targeted audience in support of the AMBER Alert coordinator. These alerts assist in notifying the public about recently reported child abductions with information to help in the search for the abducted child, suspected abductor, and/or suspected vehicle.

In 2018, 86 percent (n=139) of AMBER Alert cases were secondarily distributed whereas 14 percent (n=22) of the cases were not secondarily distributed because the AMBER Alert was canceled before secondary distribution was possible.

AMBER Alert Secondary Distribution was issued for 82 FAs, 51 NFAs, five LIMs, and one ERU. Nine NFAs and two FAs were later determined to be hoaxes. Seven NFAs and two FAs were subsequently identified as unfounded.



























































