

MISSING CHILDREN SERBIA



EUROPEAN MISSING CHILDREN HOTLINE 116000 IN SERBIA
The First Ten Years of Operation

The First Ten Years of Operation: Findings, Trends and Recommendations

"Thank you for everything that you did for me and my family while I was looking for my child. It felt better to know that you were there for us and we could call you at any time, day or night. You were by my side while we were looking for her, as well as when the police informed me that she was found. I would never forget the joy and relief that I felt when I was informed that Maja had been found..."

Mother of a missing girl (13)



Missing Children Europe



The missing children hotline 116000 in Serbia is a support service for missing children, children at risk and their parents and carers. It is available 24/7 in 32 European countries, where in 22 of these countries the hotline is coordinated by organisations belonging to the Missing Children Europe (MCE)¹.

Introduction

By means of the decision by the **Electronic Communication and Postal Services Regulatory Agency (RATEL²)**, of 25 May 2012, ASTRA – Anti-Trafficking Action received the license for operation of the European Missing Children Hotline in Serbia. This was the result of many months of intense cooperation and support that ASTRA had been receiving from **Missing Children Europe (MCE)** and the Greek organisation of **Hamogelo³**, as well as of the cooperation established with the telephone operators covering the territory of Serbia. Due to ASTRA's activity, it was agreed with the operators that all calls to 116000 hotline from our country would be **free of charge**.

"We contacted all the operators in Serbia, organised meetings with them, acquainted them with the functioning and purpose of this hotline, as well as with the necessity for its use to be free of charge for all its users. To our great satisfaction, they all recognised the importance of the 116000 Hotline and supported our initiative."

Marija Anđelković, Executive Director of ASTRA

In 2014, ASTRA signed the **Memorandum of Cooperation with the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Serbia⁴** concerning joint efforts in establishing an effective system of protection of missing children in Serbia. Not long after that, the first meetings with the police and Public Prosecutor's Office ensued, concerning the introduction of **an early missing child alert system**. For the purpose of networking and establishing

cooperation with all major actors in the field, ASTRA also became a member of the **Global Missing Children Network (GMCN)⁵**.

In 2016, ASTRA was accredited as a **MCE organisation** managing this specialised hotline. This means that all the procedures and manners of operation of the European Missing Children Hotline 116000 in Serbia, led by ASTRA, have been harmonised and formalised in line with the demanding standards of the MCE and the national legislative framework.

In this way, a service has been created which:



Contributes to the efficiency of the mechanism of searching for missing children,



Publicises and further distributes key pieces of information that may contribute to locating the children, all this in cooperation with competent authorities, and in the cases which fit the protocols and procedures for alerting wider public,



Offers support to the carers and parents of missing children,



Offers support to the children and their families, after they have been found,



Has an important role in the prevention of child disappearance.

Since its beginning, the operation of the 116000 Hotline, as well as the work by different professionals engaged on this hotline, has been financed by the funds obtained by ASTRA. The Hotline has professionals of different profiles steadily on duty (licensed psychologists, social workers, specialised education professionals, lawyers and educationalists). The ASTRA Team for the support to the parents of missing children and to the children themselves, after they have been found, has been continuously developing and

improving. The Team is submitted to obligatory internal and external supervision of their work, and has procedures and mechanisms for the prevention of the burn-out syndrome. Capacity building of the Expert Team is made possible due to the immense support efforts, including the permanent trainings realised by the Missing Children Europe and Global Missing Children Network. Due to these partnerships, the Team permanently learns about different aspects of the missing children phenomenon and the latest achievements and digital and technological innovations in locating missing children, while they also exchange good practice and participate in joint initiatives aimed at raising awareness of the public concerning this problem.

1 <https://missingchildreneurope.eu/>

2 <https://www.ratel.rs/cyr/>

3 <https://www.hamogelo.gr/>

4 <http://www.mup.gov.rs/wps/portal/sr/>

5 <https://globalmissingkids.org/>

In the first ten years of work, the Hotline received the total of **4,413 calls**, based on which 143 cases of missing children were mapped (**83 girls and 60 boys**). From year to year, most of these reports (89–98%) were addressed and solved successfully. As we did not receive any feedback concerning the outcome in some of these cases, one should bear in mind that this percentage perhaps fails to reflect the actual situation.

CONTACT

116000 Hotline offers services over the telephone, e-mail 116000@astra.rs, as well as via social networks and other communication channels (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, WhatsApp, Viber, Signal)



Overview of the Work by the European Missing Children Hotline in Serbia for 2012–2022

The purpose of this report is to present the results of the first ten years of the European Missing Children Hotline's operation in Serbia .

From 25 May 2012 to 31 December 2022, 116000 Hotline in Serbia worked continuously for **3,782 days**, i.e. **92,928 hours**.

During its 24/7 operation in these ten years, employees of the Hotline also collected and updated relevant data which facilitate:

- Recognition of trends,
- Direct overview of the phenomenon, as well as
- Securing evidence-based approach in the creation and implementation of better policies in the field.

Also, the decade of direct experience in working on 116000 Hotline contributed to the efforts to answer the important questions of:

- Who the callers of the 116000 Hotline are,
- Who was provided support and assistance and in what way,
- What the most common reasons for disappearance of children in Serbia are,

What categories of missing children exist,

What the outcomes of these cases are, and it also

Helped in clarifying the differences between the European Missing Children Hotline and other mechanisms used for early alarming of the public in the cases of child disappearance, such as the Child Alert System existing in the US, Australia and many European countries.

„Since ASTRA started running the European number for missing children 116000, they have worked for and received recognition from numerous parents of children who disappeared on maternity wards, ran away from home or were abducted by third persons. In the past ten years their extraordinary team of professionals have achieved wide international recognition as a leading organisation in the fields of trafficking and missing. Missing Children Europe particularly appreciates the way ASTRA consistently works from a rights-based perspective, connecting the daily experiences of trafficked persons and missing children to their political work, and its honest commitment to the protection of children above all else. ASTRA will never settle for less but will always try to achieve more.“

Aagje Ieven, Secretary General of Missing Children Europe

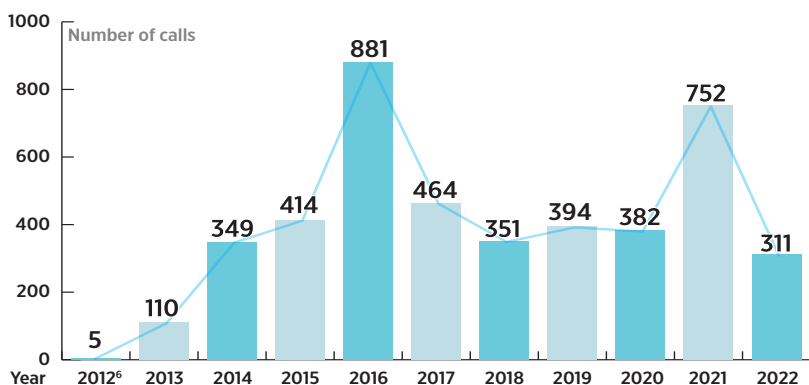
THE FIRST TEN YEARS OF OPERATION: FINDINGS, TRENDS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Ten Years' Work Statistics

From 25 May 2012 to 31 December 2022, 116000 Hotline in Serbia received **4,413 calls**. The data on the annual level are presented in Graph.

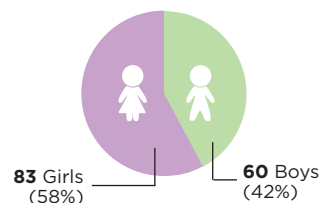
A drastic rise or fall in the number of calls may be influenced by many societal factors, such as war, migrations, pandemic, which is all comprehensively explained on the following pages.

When gender structure of the missing children for whom ASTRA received calls via 116000 Hotline is concerned, just like in the majority of other states that keep similar records, the number of calls concerning missing girls was somewhat higher than that concerning missing boys.



Graph: Overview of the number of calls per year

Number of calls	4.413
Number of the reported missing children	143
Girls	83 (58%)
Boys	60



Missing children graph - girls/boys, number and share

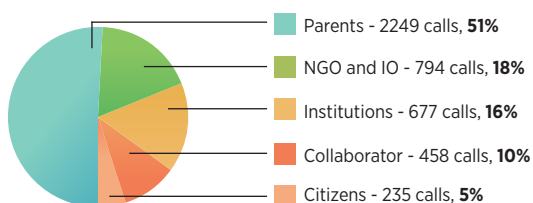
⁶ European Missing Children Hotline 116000 started its work in Serbia on 25 May 2012.

Who the CALLERS AND BENEFICIARIES of the 116000 Hotline Are

During the years, the structure of the callers and beneficiaries of the 116000 Hotline also changed. The calls were placed to seek support, or information, to report disappearance of a child, or receive support after he/she had been located.

	Parents	NGO ⁷ and IO ⁸	Institutions	Collaborator ⁹	Citizens
2012	5				
2013	52	33	12	8	5
2014	129	96	39	54	31
2015	137	74	87	51	65
2016	394	182	205	76	24
2017	292	64	79	5	24
2018	256	58	17		20
2019	198	78	73	23	22
2020	176	89	52	34	31
2021	446	41	78	181	6
2022	164	79	35	26	7
Total	2249	794	677	458	235
Total %	51%	18%	16%	10%	5%

Table 1: Overview of calls per year and structure of beneficiaries



Illustration/Graph 'who called us' - comprehensive number and percentage

From reviewing the statistically processed data, one may notice that during the ten years of its operation, the 116000 Hotline gained confidence of the children's **parents, or carers** in the first place, but also of numerous **collaborators from the organisations and institutions** that we cooperated with in concrete cases.

Parents were the most frequent beneficiaries, i.e. callers of the 116000 Hotline. They turned to us as a measure of prevention, getting information about the services provided by ASTRA, but they also reported disappearances of their children. They also contacted us after their child had been found to receive psycho-social support for their child and traumatised family members, as well as in order to prevent future disappearances. Additionally, by calling the 116000 Hotline, parents/carers could obtain information and advice about what they should do if their child goes missing, who they should turn to and, depending on the case, what documents they need to collect. During the search period, it is a common practice for ASTRA's Expert Team to maintain contact with the parents/carers¹⁰, and **provide psychosocial support** in line with their needs. Simultaneously, ASTRA Team communicates with the police and public prosecutor's office concerning any findings they might have obtained, as well as with other associates and collaborators that may help or accelerate location of the child, while they also spread the information concerning the disappearance as needed, through their communication channels.

⁷ Nongovernmental organisation from Serbia and abroad, including members of the Missing Children Europe.

⁸ Abbreviation for international organisations such as Red Cross, Save the Children, etc.

⁹ Service providers (lawyers, therapists and other professionals).

¹⁰ Both parents, or only the mother, father, or a third party.

Nongovernmental and international organisations also take on the role of those reporting the case of missing children, or they act as associate organisations that ASTRA turns to for assistance or support pertaining to the received reports. This is particularly important in urgent situations, when swift exchange of information is crucial for finding a missing children, both in Serbia and abroad. When we talk about organisations from abroad, regardless of the fact that each of them have their own procedures in line with their national legislation, the identical operation principles¹¹, similar levels of sensitisation and mutual solidarity prevail in the communication and exchange of important info with the purpose of swiftly finding the missing children.

As is presented in Table 1, 16% of the total number of the placed calls refers to communication with institutions. We, accordingly, conclude that the co-operation with the state-run sector needs to be improved and widened, especially as the official data by the MoI indicate that the majority of the children whose disappearances are reported, are children running away from institutions and foster families. ASTRA therefore invests significant efforts to make the 116000 Missing Children Hotline even more recognisable in the very institutions, as an important support service in solving disappearances of children, prevention thereof and the subsequent post-incident support.

¹¹ Accessibility, confidentiality, support and participation, level of training of the persons working on the 116000 Hotline, cooperation with institutions and organisations.

Development of the European Missing Children Hotline 116000 in Serbia 2012-2022

The following section of the report provides an overview of the development of the European Missing Children Hotline 116000 in Serbia, as well as of important events, starting from the first reports of the cases of missing babies in 2012, at the beginning of the Hotline's operation, through the migrant crisis of 2015/16, right down to the current condition.



A significant share of the calls, throughout the 116000 Hotline's work, were informative calls. Parents and other citizens wished to find out more about the functioning of the European Missing Children Hotline in Serbia, things they can do in

case of their child's disappearance, etc. Additionally, a smaller portion of the calls concerned issues and questions not directly related to the problem of missing children, but indeed pertaining to beneficiaries in some kind of vulnerable

position, yet lacking information about realisation of certain rights, knowledge about the system of state administration, social protection, etc

¹² [https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/fre#{%22itemid%22:\[%22002-7508%22\]}](https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/fre#{%22itemid%22:[%22002-7508%22]})

WHAT CAUSES CHILD DISAPPEARANCES IN SERBIA

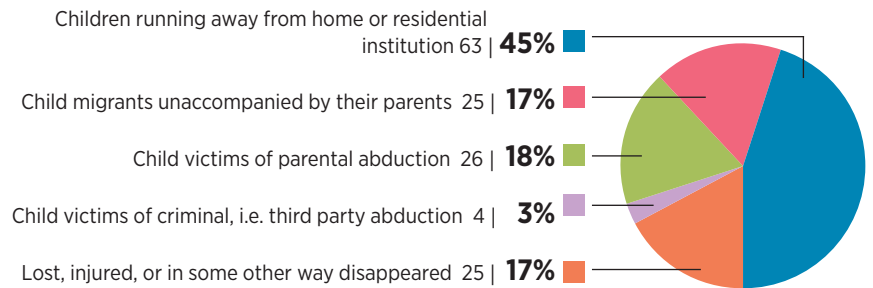
The identified reasons for child disappearances range from running away from home or residential institutions due to issues with one's family, school, foster family, residential home, exposure to violence, neglect or abuse, right down to experiencing personal or family trauma, or other living circumstances (divorce of one's

parents, loss of a close person). Also, additional reasons for child disappearances include mental health issues (by the parents/carers, or children themselves), separation from one's family during migration or refuge, being a victim or survivor of violence, or of a crime committed by a close or unknown person.

The largest number of the children whose disappearance is reported are 13 to 17 years old teenagers.

Categories of Missing Children – ASTRA Statistical Data and Practice

Bearing in mind that the reasons for child disappearances may differ, i.e. that they may be caused by different external circumstances, independent from one's birth family, social institution in which the child is placed, or the child him/herself, but that they can also be caused by circumstances within the family/placement, or by changes within the children themselves – based on our ten years of experience, we classified the children in whose finding ASTRA took part into the following categories:



Illustration/Graph of the cause of disappearance – number and percentage

Children Running Away from Home or Residential Institution

As much as 68% of all the cases of missing children in Europe reported via the 116000 Hotline are **children running away from home**. Though such reports are sometimes not taken seriously, running away from home is often caused by neglect and/or some type of violence. Additionally, these children are at an increased risk of numerous dangers, both in their immediate environment and online.

Majority of the calls in this category were placed by the children's parents or carers, reporting their children running away from home.

To a lesser extent, these reports involved running away from residential institutions, or foster families. The age of the children whose disappearances were reported ranged from 11 to 17. In more than 50% of the cases, these children were 15.

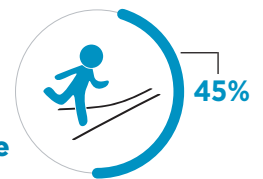
Children were usually found **within 7 days**, while in some cases the search lasted for as much as **two months**. When it comes to the children who have been repeatedly running away, the search may last for years. ASTRA monitors these cases and is in communication with the parents/carers, as well as with the competent authorities.

ASTRA's Support and Services

During the search, but also after the child has been found, ASTRA's support to the child and the parents/carers includes the following services:

- **Publishing information within the country and abroad, pertaining to the missing child, with the written consent by the parent, and after the consultations and exchange of information with MoI representatives;**
- **Psychosocial support** (psychological and emotional support during the search and after the child has been found, making connections with institutions and organisations that may be helpful in searching for the child in Serbia and abroad, accompaniment and support while visiting different agencies, institutions, organisations);
- **Legal support** (informing on legal position, procedures, communication with institutions, assistance in filling in forms and applications, submission of different applications, requests, etc.);
- **Participation in case conference and consultations** with competent authorities, with the purpose of obtaining further support;
- **Providing psychological** (therapeutic) support to children and their parents/carers;
- **Obtaining other services for the child and family.**

All the services that NGO ASTRA provides are free of charge for the beneficiaries.



A Case from the Practice

- ASTRA ID 454/2020

Mother of a thirteen-year-old girl reported her disappearance a number of times and turned for help to the local police, centre for social work, healthcare institutions and public prosecutor's office, as she suspected that her daughter is a victim of different types of exploitation.

Even though the mother made different efforts in order to make the competent authorities undertake appropriate protection measures, there were no concrete developments, nor the girl's situation improved in any way. On the contrary, representatives of the institutions were saying that they could not help her and that the girl, as soon as she was returned home, needed to be placed in a psychiatric institution. For a number of times, the mother, either on her own, or accompanied by the police, made rounds of the locations where citizens had reported seeing the girl. After being found, the girl would soon leave home once again and stopped contact with her mother.

A couple of months from the girl's first disappearance, the mother received a report accusing the girl of a theft. The vicious circle of this repeated behavioural pattern, from running away from home to being accused of different crimes, was hard to break. Advised by her friend to do so, the mother contacted ASTRA via the 116000 Hotline, and at that point the work on this case, including support, commenced.

The mother was informed on the rights and procedures, she received support in communicating with other organisations, as well as other services from the domains of social and legal support.

Bearing in mind that the girl's running away episodes were connected to the fact that she was seen and spent time with a presumed abuser and exploiter, who had already been known to the police, but also to the ASTRA's Team for supporting human trafficking victims, it was justifiably suspected that the girl was also a potential victim of exploitation, i.e. trafficking in human beings. Competent authorities were informed about this suspicion, so that they could initiate appropriate actions for the purpose of the girl's protection as soon as possible.

The meeting that was held in the public prosecutor's office made possible the **creation of an individual support and protection plan**, while it also prepared all the institutions for urgent reaction as soon as the girl was located.

All this resulted in the girl, after she had been found, immediately being provided medical care services and support with the purpose of her recovery, and received the adequate therapy. A relationship of trust and high quality communication were established with the girl, and she returned to her regular education. Meetings with representatives of the institutions were also initiated so that they could be actively engaged and undertake concrete measures, bearing in mind that the girl had also been officially identified as a victim of human trafficking. In the meantime, the presumed perpetrator was imprisoned for the crimes he had previously committed.

Child Migrants Unaccompanied by Their Parents/Carers

17%



The largest number of calls and reports of missing children (33) was recorded in 2016. The great fluctuation of the migrant and refugee population through Serbia in that year contributed to an increase of the calls referring to missing migrant children. Escaping from the areas stricken by war and unrest, a large number of refugees moved along the Balkan route, across Serbia, towards EU countries, primarily Austria, Germany and Switzerland. On this long and exhausting road, migrants/refugees, including children, often faced different risks and challenges, such as family separation, being lost, or disappearing. It frequently happened to children from Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria to be separated from their families at the Iranian-Turkish border, as well as in Greece, Turkey, or Serbia, so their family reunions needed to be organised. Also, a certain number of reports of disappearance were received from international organisations with their branch-offices in Serbia, as well as from nongovernmental organisations from Serbia and abroad. To locate the missing children in these cases required usually less than a week.

In the cases of disappearances of children from migrant population, ASTRA cooperated with representatives of national and international NGOs, as well as with international organisations and institutions. We had our most frequent contacts with the organisations providing support and assistance to refugees and migrants along the migratory route.

„It was more than 15 years ago that the need for better addressing the phenomena of missing children, child exploitation and trafficking in the SE European region became clearly visible and led “The Smile of the Child” to join forces with international actors such as International Center for Missing and Exploited children ICMEC and Missing Children Europe MCE and create the South-eastern European Center for Missing and Exploited Children (SEEC). One of SEEC’s most important accomplishments was supporting and training ASTRA to assume the operation of the 116000 hotline in Serbia. Today, on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the 116000 in Serbia, we are extremely proud of ASTRA’s work in establishing an efficient protection system for missing children in the country, as well as being a key partner in cases of cross-border cooperation and coordination.”

Piji Protopsaltis, Coordinator for International Cooperation

A case from the practice

- ASTRA ID 307/2017

Our colleagues from the citizens’ association Praxis,¹³ which inter alia works with the refugee and migrant population, informed ASTRA about a missing children case, and connected us with the father who turned to them for help. We learned from the father that he was an Afghan refugee and that he had arrived to Serbia from Greece, via North Macedonia. In North Macedonia, he had been separated from the rest of his family. His wife and two sons were returned from North Macedonia to Greece. The father was very worried, as his wife and one of the sons had medical conditions. They had been treated for these in Afghanistan, but at the time of the separation, they were unable to find therapy. The father was planning to stay in Serbia until his family was reunited once again.

We contacted the searching services of the Red Cross Serbia, and asked them to forward personal data of the family and their photographs to their colleagues in the Red Cross Greece, that could presumably help with this family’s reunion. After that, urgent medical care was provided to the family members whose health was compromised, and they were sent information and contacts in order to initiate further procedures with the purpose of family reunification. All these efforts were realised in cooperation with Greek organisation Hamogelo, a member of the Missing Children Europe (MCE) network, which served as yet another reminder of the importance of networking and international cooperation. Three weeks after the initial telephone contact, all the family members were together once again.

¹³ <https://www.praxis.org.rs/index.php/sr/>

Parental abduction

18%



Parental abduction involves taking away or keeping the child contrary to the court decisions of custody, or visitation right, without the consent of other parent. This type of child abuse is one of the means of partnership or domestic violence, exercised in order to establish control and power of one partner over the other.

During the ten years of our work with the European Missing Children Hotline 116000 in Serbia, we received calls by parents, both domestic and foreign nationals, as well as by collaborators of the European Missing Children Hotline Network, concerning keeping or taking away of children by their other parent. The children whose abductions were reported were between 2 and 12, but usually these were very young children, from 2 to 7 years old.

The cases of parental abduction involve application of the obligations accepted through signing of the Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction¹⁴, the implementation of which is within the competence of the Department for International Legal Aid in Civil Issues of the Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Serbia, with which ASTRA has a successful cooperation in such cases.

Except to report their child’s abduction, parents frequently used the 116000 Hotline to seek information pertaining to the way they should act in case one of the parents does not respect court decisions concerning the child custody and visitation, as well as when it comes to seeing their children during the court proceedings for custody, or when they suspected or had reasons to believe that the child would be abducted by other parent.

¹⁴ Official Gazette SFRY – “international agreements”, no. 7/91

A case from the practice

- ASTRA ID 396/2019

In early 2019, a foreign national, mother and the legal guardian of her children, called the 116000 Hotline, suspecting that the children age 2 and 4 had been abducted by their father and were on the territory of Serbia. Having collected the information, ASTRA contacted the Ministry of the Interior, Centre for Social Work, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Justice and initiated cooperation with all these institutions, where it forwarded the information, as well as all the applications, court decisions and documentation received from the mother.

Additionally, ASTRA provided the mother with information and clarifications pertaining to the initiation of the proceedings and implementation of the European Convention on Human Rights and the Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction. As after the check, it had not been established that the children were on the territory of Serbia, the client was instructed to turn to the competent institutions abroad, concretely to an organisation belonging to the network of the European Missing Children Hotline from the territory of the country where the children were finally located. Soon, the children were found and, after the appropriate procedure, returned to their mother.

!!! Abuse of the European Missing Children Hotline 116000

Abuses of SOS hotlines occur all over the world, so Serbia is no exception. The greatest number of abuses of the European Missing Children Hotline 116000 occur when it comes to the calls concerning the category of “parental abductions”. Usually, the violent parent who did not receive custody of the children by means of the court decision, and/or has been prohibited from approaching the other parent and children through a restraining order, contacts ASTRA to report supposed abduction of the children by other parent, trying to get into contact with them in this way, contrary to the court decision. Once we suspect that the call we have received is of that kind, in cooperation with the police, public prosecutor’s office and other institutions, ASTRA makes checks of the information and caller. It frequently turns out that this is an abuser which has the restraining order pronounced against him/her. In such situations, it is not uncommon that the other parent and children are in a shelter for victims of domestic and partner violence. It happens that such calls are received from a person instructed to call ASTRA by some other NGO without sufficient experience in the situations of violence and exploitation to be able to understand the background of the case.

Lost, Injured or Otherwise Disappeared Children



17%

There is a special type of calls that refer to the cases of children for whom it is suspected that they got lost or injured, leading to their disappearance under unexplained circumstances. We received such calls by the parents, relatives, nongovernmental organisations and institutions. In locating the children who had disappeared in such way, we cooperated with organisations and institutions from Serbia, as well as with international organisations. The age of the children who disappeared in this way ranged from 1 to 17.

A boy (3) got lost in a mall while his parents were window shopping. The police was alarmed soon, and ASTRA's Missing Children Hotline 116000 was contacted, but the mall employees, after the boy's disappearance had been announced over their public address system, located the boy shortly.

Abduction by a third party



3%

The cases which attract the greatest attention of the public and cause the greatest alarm and fear among parents, sometimes even panic, are certainly those where children are abducted by third parties. Even though these cases are **the least frequent type of child disappearance**, the circumstances in which they occur and their context, i.e. kidnapping of a child by a third party, cause strong reactions by the public. Two such cases of disturbing kidnappings of two girls who were subsequently sexually abused and murdered, marked the year of 2014. Bearing in mind the way in which the girls disappeared, the course and outcomes of the investigations, involvement of the public in following these cases, as well as experiences of other countries in relation to similar cases, ASTRA began with the

activities of advocating for the establishment of a state-run system of early alarming of the public in the cases of missing children.

Concerning the identified need of establishing a systemic solution for effective location of missing children, ASTRA has, since 2014, had a number of meetings with the Ministry of the Interior, State Public Prosecutor's Office, Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs and the Union of Journalists of Serbia, and designed proposals and comments on the Draft Action Plan for Chapter 24: Justice, Freedom and Security (6.2.8.4)¹⁵. These proposals and comments have been adopted and they refer to the **necessity of establishing a system of quickly alarming the public** and amending police proce-

dures in order to initiate the search immediately after the reception of a disappearance report.

According to the analysis of ASTRA's database of the calls to the European Missing Children Hotline 116000 for Serbia, which is presented in this report, it has been assessed that 1 to 3 cases each year would fulfil the precisely defined criteria and procedures to set the early public alarming system in motion.¹⁶

¹⁵ Action Plan for Chapter 24

¹⁶ Find more in the Analysis of Early Alarm Models in Missing Children Cases made by ASTRA *Early Warning System in Case of Missing Child*

The connection between the European number for missing children - 116000, the missing child alarm (child alert) and the AMBER alarm

In a number of countries in Europe and the world, there are established alarm systems in case of a missing child. Although these systems are differently positioned and organized, and have different names, most of the criteria for triggering an alarm are common:



The child must be under 18 years of age,



A preliminary police investigation must conclude that the child's life is in danger,



Descriptive information and a photograph of the child must be available,



The competent authority¹⁷ must approve the triggering of a missing child alert.

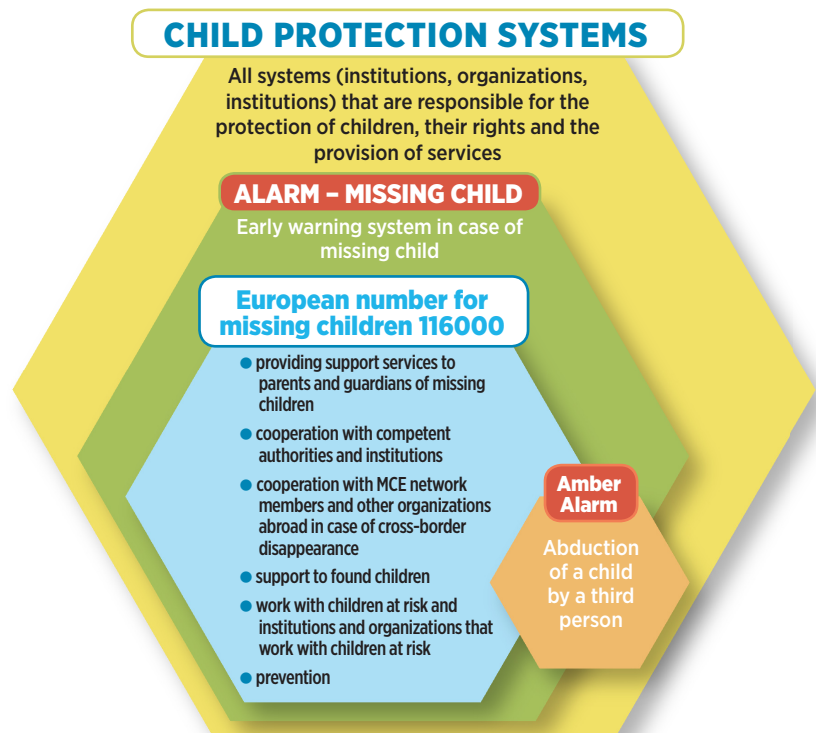
Beside to the alarm in the mentioned circumstances, there is also a so-called AMBER alarm¹⁸.

The main **difference** between the "ordinary" alarm (Child Alert), which is activated in case of a missing child, in order to activate the AMBER alarm, there must be a **clear indication that the missing child has been abducted**.

¹⁷ In most countries it is the police.

¹⁸ America's Missing: Broadcast Emergency Response (AMBER) or Missing America: Broadcast Emergency Response, an acronym derived from the name, but also after nine-year-old Amber Hagermann, who was kidnapped while riding her bicycle in Arlington, Texas, and then brutally murdered.

In Serbia, the police have their own procedures when it comes to alerting the public in case of missing persons, including children, and there is also a European number for missing children - 116000. The scheme shows the relationship of a wider group of actors (state authorities, institutions and organizations) in the child protection system, as well as the potential site of an Amber Alert.



Calls Concerning the Cases of the Missing Babies



The term *missing babies* refers to the children born between 1960 and 1990, who were pronounced dead under suspicious circumstances, causing their parents to suspect that they were in fact stolen from Serbian maternity clinics and wards. In ASTRA's categorisation of missing children, the cases of the missing babies are treated as a separate category, since ASTRA's expertise and experience in combating trafficking in human beings made clear that the context of these disappearances was different and that they could be qualified as instances of the crime of trafficking in children for adoption. Serbia is not the only country where cases have been reported of babies disappearing immediately after the birth, for whom it is suspected that they were illegally taken from their parents, pronounced dead and offered for false adoptions. Before Serbia, such cases were already reported in, e.g. England and Chile.

After the establishment of the European Missing Children Hotline 116000 in Serbia, a great number of the received calls referred to the cases of the missing babies. These calls became more frequent after 26 March 2013, when the judgement by the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) was issued, determining that the Republic of Serbia had infringed the right to privacy and family life of Zorica Jovanović, the mother of a baby disappeared from the maternity ward.¹⁹

When we talk about the category of the persons reporting disappearances, in the cases of the missing babies these were parents as a rule, recognising the 116000 Hotline as yet another opportunity in the search for their children. ASTRA's European Missing Children Hotline offered different types of support to these parents, such as: informing the parents of the missing babies on obtaining the necessary documentation, procedure of filing a criminal complaint, interpretation of the law and information pertaining to potential outcomes of filing a complaint, monitoring the status of the exe-

cution of the judgement which should have had impact on solving similar cases, and informing the parents on the judgement's execution. Furthermore, for the purpose of obtaining additional information and assistance, the parents were connected with higher public prosecutor's office, Protector of Citizens, Citizens' Association YUCOM²⁰ for free legal aid, as well as with the Belgrade Group of the Missing Babies' Parents – an association which continuously and actively provides information and support to the parents of the missing babies, monitors all the changes concerning the legislation regulating this field, and organises public gatherings and protests. Additionally, together with other nongovernmental organisations, ASTRA has been in permanent communication with the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, in order to facilitate full implementation of the aforementioned 2013 judgement.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ <https://www.yucom.org.rs/>

RECOMMENDATIONS AND GUIDELINES FOR 2023-2025

Bearing in mind the previously presented findings, cases, the ten-years' worth of statistical data and the numerous pieces of data exchanged during the work on missing children cases, cooperation with institutions and organisations, parents and carers, as well as other actors, and based on the practice thus far, ASTRA has made the following list of recommendations and guidelines



Improve the coordination and cooperation between different actors (public prosecutors and judiciary, police, education and social protection) in order to establish a more efficient response in the cases of missing children

Capacity building efforts for professionals in different institutions so that they could identify, cooperate and adequately and timely react in each individual missing child case, as well as act preventively so as to suppress the risks, may be realised through promoting better understanding and reaction in practice in the cases of missing children, and through increasing specific knowledge pertaining to exploitation, prevention and child protection.



Perform timely assessment of the threats and risks for children, and react in order to provide protection. Also, in every case, and after the child has been found, realise an interview to assess the risk of repeated disappearance.

Timely identification of risks and challenges, as well as involvement of parents and children in their overcoming in everyday life, may represent the crucial prevention and support factor.



In each individual case, after the child has been found, make an individual support and protection plan for the child, and include different systems.

Developing the procedures and practices that would facilitate access to different services for the children involved in these cases, children at risk and their parents and carers, should represent one of the segments of the system's good practice. Simultaneously, it is necessary for the entire treatment of such children and their parents/carers within the system of social and legal protection, to be based on the same work principles and aimed at protecting the best interest of the child.



Develop practices and services aimed at strengthening of the child, and of parental competences.

Individual approach to every child, as well as participation in all phases of the work and provision of necessary services, create the way for a targeted overview and satisfaction of the child's needs. Such approach will have a positive and stimulating effect on the child's life and further development.



Involve the social protection system in early identification of the risks of child disappearances.

Practice has shown that, in a great number of cases, the social protection system was in contact with the family before the child's disappearance, due to their social needs and in order to provide support. This is the reason that the social protection system needs to be strengthened to map and identify children at risk, early signs, and *push* and *pull*²¹ factors that may lead to the child's disappearance, primarily in the cases involving children running away from home, institution, or foster family.



Increase visibility, capacities and resources of the 116000 Hotline.

Support by the state and media to the operation of the 116000 Hotline, as well as information about and promotion of the hotline through different communication channels, information-prevention campaigns and materials, as well as permanent following of the topics relevant for the field of prevention and child protection, together with exchange of good practices and spreading of intersectoral cooperation in the country and abroad.



Establish the **system of early search for children**, which would be coordinated by the competent state institution, and include the European Missing Children Hotline 116000, in line with the good practices from the neighbouring and other countries, taking into account the needs and possibilities in Serbia.

²¹ The situations encountered by the children running away from home, or social care institutions, get them into an increased risk of violence and exploitation. *Push* factors, such as family conflicts, divorce, violence, abuse and neglect in the family environment, substance abuse by the parents, family members' mental health challenges, displacement of the child, etc., should be detected by the social protection system before the incident occurs. Simultaneously, great attention needs to be dedicated to the *pull* factors, involving external challenges that may include peer violence, substance abuse, antisocial behaviour and sexual exploitation, so that the measures of protection and support to the child may be undertaken in the timely manner.

Authors:

Danijela Nikolić
Jasmina Krunic
Hristina Piskulidis

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Marija Andjelković
ASTRA – Anti-trafficking Action
Belgrade, Serbia
astra@astra.rs
www.astra.rs
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