

Proactive Public Awareness: AMBER Alerts

Anna Rimanelli

Introduction

The first three hours in child abduction cases are crucial to the outcome and safe recovery of the victim. In 2006, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), within the Department of Justice (DOJ), released a report that stated shocking statistics. This report revealed that 76% of children reported missing were found deceased within the first three hours, and 88.5% of missing children were found deceased within the first twenty-four hours after first reported missing.¹ The America's Missing: Broadcast Emergency Response (AMBER) Alert System broadcasts emergency alerts to the public to aid in the search for actively abducted children. AMBER Alerts are especially critical within the first three hours of the abduction. Therefore, familiarizing the public with AMBER Alert programs, procedures, and resources will help the public recognize AMBER Alert crises and streamline recovery information during crucial steps in abduction cases.

Since the implementation of the AMBER Alert System, these harrowing statistics have been reversed. According to the 2023 AMBER Alert Report, 72% of children were recovered within the first three hours of an AMBER Alert being issued, and 96% of children were recovered within seventy-two hours.² As of December 2024, the AMBER Alert System has contributed to the recovery of over 1,200 children, and, in return, deserves public and government recognition that urges further development of AMBER Alert resources and programs.³

The AMBER Alert Program is crucial to the recovery of abducted children and has extensive outreach through local, state, and federal governments, which requires careful collaboration between all individuals involved in the case. Understanding the role of these agencies, third-party organizations, and the public is essential for emergency preparedness at the individual, community, and national levels. In many instances, people in the public are unaware of the many resources on AMBER Alerts until it applies directly to a tragic personal event, but it is important

to increase public awareness for everyone. Anyone could help identify a suspect or victim in the event of an AMBER Alert.

The goal of this paper is to increase awareness of the AMBER Alert System and its available resources, both for the public and for researchers. Increasing public awareness encourages proactive planning for child recovery and limits reactive responses, which tend to be less efficient for individuals, local communities, and government agencies. Furthermore, it is important to raise public awareness to further advocate for laws that encourage funding and programming that ultimately bring abducted children safely home.

Background and Overview

The AMBER Alert System was formed in Arlington, Texas, in 1996 and has grown to include AMBER Alert Plans in all states and U.S. territories.⁴ The assembly of the AMBER Alert System was in reaction to the abduction and homicide of a young girl, Amber Hagerman. After the recovery of the deceased 9-year-old, it became apparent that law enforcement may benefit from involving the public and media in searching for a child during an abduction case. Ideally, increasing the number of people involved in searching for the child would increase the chances of the child being safely recovered. Today, the Amber Hagerman case remains unsolved and serves as a tragic reminder of the importance of a proactive AMBER Alert System plan and its potential to recover abducted children.⁵

The AMBER Alert System acts as an early warning communication to alert the public about currently abducted children. It is important to note that AMBER Alerts are only enacted during the most serious child abduction cases.⁶ An AMBER Alert will be issued when law enforcement believes a child, under the age of eighteen, has been abducted and is in imminent danger of bodily harm or death. Additionally, an AMBER Alert can only be issued if there is identifiable information available about the victim and/or suspect.⁷ Otherwise, the public cannot be notified.

For example, alerts are frequently issued with vehicle information or photos of the victim or suspect. The public, with this identifiable information, can call 911 if they believe they have seen the vehicle, victim, or suspect. Additionally, anonymous tips can be given online through the Cyber Tipline, regulated by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC).⁸

On a federal level, the DOJ runs and regulates AMBER Alert Plans all over the country, coordinating the agencies and resources used in the case of an AMBER Alert.⁹ AMBER Alerts are geographically split and issued at the local (single county), regional (multi-county), statewide, or multistate level.¹⁰ The larger the geographical area the abduction case covers, the more agencies and organizations are involved in the AMBER Alert, requiring additional coordination.

Federal Outreach

There are over 80 AMBER Alert plans throughout the United States, which necessitates collaboration and trusting relationships between agencies.¹¹ Once an AMBER Alert is filed, multiple federal government agencies begin an “all-hands-on-deck” approach to recover the abducted child. Multiple federal agencies begin their processes to aid the AMBER Alert System. For example, the FBI may deploy a Child Abduction Rapid Deployment (CARD) team available through the FBI’s Violent Crimes Against Children Program to aid in the recovery of a child. Other agencies, such as the Department of Homeland Security and U.S. Marshals Service, are kept updated with the case and remain available to help in the search if needed.¹² Additionally, the Department of Transportation (DOT) uses DOT highway signs to project alerts to local drivers.¹³ Each contributing agency has their own plan of action and responsibilities during an AMBER Alert. Integrating these plans generates the best recovery effort possible.

Another major resource deployed at the initiation of an AMBER Alert is the Secondary Distribution Program that is managed and carried out by the NCMEC under the direction of the DOJ. It is important to note that NCMEC does not determine if AMBER Alerts are issued, and all actions taken by NCMEC are by permission of local, state, or federal law enforcement.¹⁴ The NCMEC has a vast network of secondary alert distributions, including but not limited to national companies, such as Google, social media companies, the Federation for Internet Alerts, and the Out of Home Advertising Association. The NCMEC’s Secondary Distribution Program’s AMBER Alerts interrupt regular radio and television programming with alert information, along with lottery and digital billboards and wireless communications, such as text messages.¹⁵

The purpose of using this extensive network is to use all available public communication outlets to alert as many people in the community as possible. According to the 2023 AMBER Alert Report, 75% of abductions take place in or outside the victim’s residence or car, so suspects and victims are frequently “hiding in plain sight.”¹⁶ Additionally, over 50% of abductions are performed by a parent or family member and therefore it may be more difficult for a bystander to discern a potential threat.¹⁷ Having the public alerted may make it more difficult for the suspect to “blend in” to daily life. It is also common for a suspect to release a child once an AMBER Alert is issued due to fear of legal repercussions.¹⁸

The Federal Emergency Management Association (FEMA) also provides tools for issuing alerts, such as the Integrated Public Alert and Warning System (IPAWS), which issues a variety of emergency notifications like the Emergency Alert System (EAS) and the National Weather Service Emergency Alerts.¹⁹ The AMBER Alert System also partners with the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), which mandates standards for use of communication and technology and helps distribute Wireless Emergency Alerts.²⁰

Federal Resources

Federal resources on AMBER Alerts are widely available online but differ between agencies and organizations. Users should be aware they may need to navigate multiple sites to find all information they need. A good place to start is the DOJ Office of Justice Programs, which has a dedicated collection of federal AMBER Alert resources, including blogs, speeches, fact sheets, and press releases.²¹

The NCMEC plays a large role in the AMBER Alerts and also plays a larger role in the AMBER Alert System’s documentation and data management. The NCMEC and OJJDP partnered to create yearly AMBER Alert Reports, beginning in 2007. These annual reports are valuable to users looking for specific statistical information with analysis. For example, the AMBER Alert Reports contain information regarding demographics on children and abductors, recovery statistics, alert locations, incident duration, hoaxes, and more.²²

OJJDP also has numerous publications related to AMBER Alerts that are available on their website.²³ One of the best sources for up-to-date information is *The Amber Advocate*, a quarterly magazine that highlights news, success stories, current program development, recognized workers, news, and more. This resource is the best one-stop shop for up-to-date information about the AMBER Alert System. Issues from 2018 on are available via OJJDP; all issues (2006-current) are available in *The AMBER Advocate* magazine archive.²⁴

Finally, users may find the Prosecutorial Remedies and Other Tools to End the Exploitation of Children Today (PROTECT) Act useful. The PROTECT Act was signed into law on April 30, 2003, and comprehensively strengthened law enforcement's ability to prevent, investigate, prosecute, and punish violent crimes against children. The PROTECT Act also established the role of the National AMBER Alert Coordinator in the Department of Justice. The role of the National Coordinator is to issue minimum standards or guidelines for AMBER Alerts that states can adopt voluntarily.²⁵ The National AMBER Alert Coordinator is to aid local and state agencies in creating or advancing their AMBER Alert Plans. The public is encouraged to familiarize themselves with the PROTECT Act and learn how the National AMBER Alert Coordinator helps their own state and local governments' AMBER Alert Plans. For researchers, the PROTECT Act is worth reviewing both for its history and its continual funding for advancement of the AMBER Alert programs and policies.

State and Local Government Collaboration and Resources

The establishment of the National Coordinator helped in the production of AMBER Alert plans in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Each state has different primary agencies that they collaborate with, depending on the networks available in their region. Additionally, each state AMBER Alert plan includes its own criteria for issuing alerts and their own state program contacts. For example, Alabama's State Contact for AMBER Alerts is the Alabama State Bureau of Investigations, while Iowa's State AMBER Alert contact is the Iowa State Patrol Communications. As a result, navigating through state or local government documents and resources on AMBER Alert information is not always straightforward. Helpful resources include a list of State AMBER Alert Contacts, as well as a list of Missing Child Clearinghouse websites, both maintained by the NCMEC.²⁶

State contacts can provide additional information about the AMBER Alert plan near you. For example, the Michigan AMBER Alert Plan is supported by the Michigan State Police, Michigan Department of Transportation, Michigan Lottery, Michigan Sheriff's Association, Michigan Association of Chiefs of Police, and the Michigan Association of Broadcasters.²⁷ State agencies depend on local law enforcement agencies to report AMBER Alerts and assist throughout the case until recovery. These agencies and organizations are crucial to the success of an AMBER Alert Plan. Depending on the county or city, there may be AMBER Alert information located on local government websites as well.

Ongoing Developments

In recent years, coordinating AMBER Alert plans in Tribal Lands became a topic of focus as more reports suggested the absence of recovery programs for American Indians in tribal communities, colloquially referred to as Indian country. In 2018, the Ashlynnne Mike AMBER Alert in Indian Country Act was passed, which amended the PROTECT Act to reauthorize the AMBER Alert grant program and modify the program to include the integration of tribal AMBER Alert Systems into state AMBER Alert Systems.²⁸ The goal of integration is to allocate resources that may be available in aiding the recovery of any child that travels in or out of tribal land. The OJJDP created the AMBER Alert in Indian Country (AIIC) Initiative with the goal of assisting Tribal communities develop programs to safely recover endangered, missing, or abducted children.²⁹ The AIIC works with tribal members to enhance response capacities and capabilities and increase public participation in protecting children through the update of technologies and policies.

AMBER Alert partners continue to collaborate and develop resources, programs, and plans that assist with the safe recovery of abducted children in and out of the United States. More than 30 countries in addition to the United States have begun Rapid Emergency Child Alert Systems like AMBER Alerts with the help of the International Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (ICMEC). The ICMEC also provides international information, including child abduction statistics, current cases, programs, and partners.³⁰

Conclusion

The AMBER Alert System has evolved since its origin in 1996 with advanced outreach and programming to assist in the recovery of an abducted child. Although government agencies, organizations, and the public are invested in the AMBER Alert System and rely on its resources, not all AMBER Alerts result in a safe recovery. To limit the occurrences of unrecovered children, the AMBER Alert System continues to look for avenues of improvement with partnering agencies and the public to maximize the benefits of collaboration. The public is also encouraged to review AMBER Alert emergency preparedness at home by familiarizing themselves with their local, state, and federal partners. The purpose of understanding the intertwining of these agencies and their resources is so users can swiftly locate relevant information, whether for research or an emergency. Furthermore, the alerts only work when individuals in agencies, media, and the public take them seriously and report suspicious activity or AMBER Alert identifiable information.

In conclusion, it is imperative to proactively promote public awareness of AMBER Alerts to aid in the recovery of children, advocate for further policy and funding, and encourage further collaboration, which has proven to successfully recover abducted children.

Anna Rimanelli (annar10@illinois.edu) is a 2025 MLIS student of the Department of Library and Information Science, Graduate School of Information Sciences at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, expected graduation December 2025. This paper was written for IS594, Spring 2025, Government Information, Professor Dominique Hallett.

Notes

1. U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, *AMBER Alert Best Practices*, 2nd ed., April 2019, 3, <https://purl.fdlp.gov/GPO/gpo119343>.
2. National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, *2023 AMBER Alert Report*, 2024, 17, https://www.missingkids.org/content/dam/missingkids/pdfs/2023_Annual_AMBER_Alert_Report.pdf; A PURL exists for all AMBER Alert Reports: <https://purl.fdlp.gov/GPO/gpo25949>.
3. U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, "Frequently Asked Questions," AMBER Alert, Accessed April 2025, <https://amberalert.ojp.gov/about/faqs>.
4. *AMBER Alert Best Practices*, 2nd ed., 1.
5. *2023 AMBER Alert Report*, 5.
6. *AMBER Alert Best Practices*, 2nd ed., 1.
7. *2023 Amber Alert Report*, 7.
8. National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, "CyberTipline Report," Accessed April 2025, <https://report.cybertip.org/>.
9. *AMBER Alert Best Practices*, 2nd ed., IV.
10. *2023 Amber Alert Report*, 10.
11. *2023 Amber Alert Report*, 9.
12. *AMBER Alert Best Practices*, 2nd ed., 41-42.
13. U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, "Frequently Asked Questions," AMBER Alert, Accessed April 2025, <https://amberalert.ojp.gov/about/faqs>.
14. *2023 AMBER Alert Report*, 10.
15. U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, *AMBER Alert Secondary Distribution Program Summary*, Accessed April 2025, https://www.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh241/files/media/document/amber_alert_secondary_distribution_program_summary.pdf.
16. *2023 AMBER Alert Report*, 18.
17. *2023 AMBER Alert Report*, 14.
18. *2023 AMBER Alert Report*, 22.
19. Federal Emergency Management Agency, "General Public," Integrated Public Alert & Warning System (IPAWS), Updated July 21, 2025, <https://www.fema.gov/emergency-managers/practitioners/integrated-public-alert-warning-system/public>.
20. "Wireless Emergency Alerts (WEA)," Federal Communications Commission, Updated May 22, 2025, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250524135125/https://www.fcc.gov/consumers/guides/wireless-emergency-alerts-wea>; "Wireless Emergency Alerts," Federal Communications Commission, Updated August 27, 2025, <https://www.fcc.gov/public-safety-and-homeland-security/policy-and-licensing-division/alerting/general/wireless>.
21. U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, AMBER Alert, Accessed April 2025, <https://amberalert.ojp.gov/>.
22. U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, "Statistics," AMBER Alert, Accessed April 2025, <https://amberalert.ojp.gov/statistics>; This website contains the AMBER Alert Reports, which can also be found via the following PURL: <https://purl.fdlp.gov/GPO/gpo25949>.
23. U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, "Publications Listing," AMBER Alert, Accessed April 2025, <https://amberalert.ojp.gov/publications>.
24. "AMBER Advocate Magazine Archive," AMBER Alert Training & Technical Assistance Program, Accessed September 2025, <https://amberadvocate.org/magazine-archive/>; A PURL for The AMBER Advocate also exists: <https://purl.fdlp.gov/GPO/LPS112822>.
25. The PROTECT Act of 2003, P. L. 108-21, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PLAW-108publ21/pdf/PLAW-108publ21.pdf>.
26. National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, "AMBER Alerts," Accessed April 2025, <https://www.missingkids.org/gethelpnow/amber>. The list of State AMBER Alert Contacts is provided in the section labeled Additional Information; users must select the plus sign icon to expand the section to show the list; National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, Missing Child Clearinghouses, Accessed September 2025, <https://www.missingkids.org/gethelpnow/clearinghouses>.

27. "Alerts," Michigan State Police, Accessed April 2025, <https://www.michigan.gov/en/msp/services/alerts>.
28. Ashlynne Mike AMBER Alert in Indian Country Act, P. L. 115-166, <https://purl.fdlp.gov/GPO/gpo109177>.
29. "AMBER Alert in Indian Country," AMBER Alert Training & Technical Assistance Program, Accessed April 2025, <https://amberadvocate.org/aiic/aiic-home/>.
30. "Rapid Emergency Child Alert Systems," International Centre for Missing & Exploited Children, Accessed April 2025, <https://www.icmec.org/global-missing-childrens-center/child-alerts/>.