



AMBER ALERT EUROPE MULTI-ANNUAL  
WORK PROGRAMME

2022-2026

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## **AMBER ALERT EUROPE MULTI-ANNUAL WORK PROGRAMME 2022-2026**

Towards A Common European Approach on Missing Children - Missing Persons

### **I. Introduction**

AMBER Alert Europe's Multi-Annual Work Programme 2022-2026 comprises activities for the implementation of the short and mid-term priorities that are set out in the Common European Approach on Missing Children - Missing Persons (CEA). The CEA is drafted in close cooperation with the Police Expert Network on Missing Persons (PEN-MP).

### **II. Missing children - Addressing a gap at EU and national levels**

The CEA was launched in a time where protecting citizens has become one of the European Commission's main objectives, and the new EU Security Union Strategy certainly emphasises that. In addition to focusing on societal, economic, and democratic issues, special attention has been given to recognising the rights of individuals to protection and care. This attention has focused on the most vulnerable as well as strategies designed to protect them effectively. This is evident in the EU strategy for a more effective fight against child sexual abuse (CSA). While this strategy focuses on a particular threat that constitutes criminal activity, and which can therefore be immediately investigated and prosecuted in all Member States (MS), there remains a notable gap in the development of a strategy for vulnerable missing persons, in particular, missing children because of their greater vulnerabilities. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child established the child's right to be protected from all forms of violence, while the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights recognises a child's right to the protection and care necessary for its well-being. Despite the EU strategies in place, the gaps that currently exist regarding missing children are difficult to address.

Every year, in the EU, numerous children go missing. Not only are missing children extremely vulnerable, but the risks they face are significant, varied, and can continue to evolve with potentially devastating outcomes. It goes without saying that within a common space without borders missing children cannot be protected only through MS acting on their own but by MS working together.

Security of one MS is the security of all, and it relies on cooperation, information exchange, support and assistance, best practices, and learning from each other. Missing children are a common challenge for all MS, requiring a common approach at the European level.

This CEA comprises four pillars that aim to strengthen the protection of the most vulnerable at the European level, giving special attention and priority to missing children because of their greater vulnerabilities. Due to the comprehensiveness of the issues addressed by the CEA the pillars are divided into law enforcement-driven activities and into activities that are public or civil society driven.

These four pillars lay down the foundations for gradually setting up an environment in which the EU's internal borders do not present an invisible obstacle for LEA in cases of missing children.

In order to implement the CEA in the period 2022-2026, AAEU has prepared a Multi-annual Work Program that comprises activities implementing short and mid-term priorities within the four pillars of the CEA.

## **Pillar 1: Missing Persons Risk Triage (MPRT) – immediate risk identification of a missing child**

When a child goes missing, it can be an indicator of underlying problems such as abuse, sexual exploitation, gender issues, and trafficking. If a child returns and these issues remain unrecognised and untreated, often the child goes missing again. A risk assessment that includes identifying this element of risk enables a targeted response to remove or reduce the risk (Missing Persons Risk Triage – MPRT). This, in turn, can reduce the number of incidents of going missing and provide the opportunity for LEA to identify and deal with associated criminal activity. As such, it is essential that there are interventions that respond to incidents of going missing that lead to the prevention of incidents and reoccurring incidents.

Based on the expertise of law enforcement specialists of PEN-MP, a quick, proper, and effective risk identification applied to missing children' situations is crucial in determining the correct response to locate and recover the child as quickly as possible. It also can be repeatedly applied as different or additional information about a situation becomes known. This enables LEA to adjust operational measures when the risk to the child changes.

In investigations with a transnational/cross-border dimension, a common understanding of the risk relating to a missing child will facilitate a coordinated and consistent approach across borders.

### **Short term priorities:**

- o Further Identification of existing best practices to be introduced to MPRT;
- o Identification of existing gaps preventing MPRT by all EU MS (legal, linguistic, etc.);
- o Identification of ways to close these gaps to enable cross-border operational use of MPRT;
- o Ongoing evaluation of the MPRT model and research on improving risk triage.

### **Mid-term priority:**

- o Introduction of a common European colour code for missing children/persons.

## **Pillar 2: Enhanced Cross-Border Law Enforcement Cooperation on missing children**

With the abolishment of national borders, the Schengen Area, a zone with unrestricted movement of people was created. This also entails that missing children can easily be moved across a border into a neighbouring country.

Regardless of all national, regional, and EU security efforts, there remain 'grey' areas or gaps, e.g. missing children cases, that have not yet been adequately addressed. To date, a missing child does not represent a crime if there are no other elements of crime attached to the missing case. Lacking the "crime" component, the tools and techniques that law enforcement authorities (LEA) can leverage to intercede rapidly are more limited than they are in cases with known criminal components. While the nature of missing children cases means that domestically LEA are restricted from applying tools and mechanisms established to fight crime, this is even more pronounced in cases where there is a transnational dimension.

This could result in vital time being lost and the case stagnating. Ensuring these gaps are closed, and that appropriate, timely, and consistent responses in missing children' cases are available when necessary would be of significant assistance in advancing LEA efforts to protect missing children.

Efficient cooperation in these matters can be achieved only when, on an operational level, police forces are able to communicate and cooperate with their counterparts in other countries. In 2016, this common belief by the MS resulted in an informal network of law enforcement experts on missing persons. In 2019, this Police Expert Network on Missing Persons (PEN-MP) was officially recognised by the Council of the European Union. PEN-MP aims to close the gaps, exchange best practices, elaborate common standards while also establishing protocols and training in this field. It also works to address legal aspects pertaining to the agreements being developed.

**Short term priorities:**

- o Identification of existing gaps hindering the operational cross-border missing person search;
- o Identifying strategies to close these gaps while also paving the way for faster cross-border operational assistance;
- o Enhance cooperation and notification between MS on cases of missing children/persons who are at immediate risk for life or serious harm and having a transnational dimension;
- o Identification of existing EU IT tools and platforms inter-operational solutions to support this missing persons operational LEA cooperation;
- o Setting up and maintaining an AAEU/PEN-MP missing persons expert training database.

**Mid-term priorities:**

- o Continued identification of best practices, establishing of efficient standards, providing expert training and training materials, and working towards a European wide applicable approach;
- o Establishing partnerships for the implementation of training and creating a hub of expertise;
- o Laying down the foundations of a European centre of excellence for missing persons, with special attention to missing children;
- o Networking and forming alliances with other expert networks and centres that are dealing with related phenomena, i.e. CSA and CSE for children and domestic violence and trafficking in human beings for adults.

**Pillar 3: Connecting the public with law enforcement in the search for a missing child**

Citizen sourcing is a crowdsourcing practice and is applied by governments with the goal of tapping into the collective abilities of citizens and society. In missing children' cases, law enforcement frequently reaches out to the public for assistance. Enhancing trust between the public and law enforcement in the joint effort to improve the search for a missing child is therefore essential and brings added value to any search. Connecting law enforcement with the public has tremendous potential, but in today's world, it also comes with challenges.

In 2008, the European Commission recognised the urgency of the missing children issue and set an objective for all EU MS to establish an interoperable child alert system that would enable law enforcement agencies to alert their respective public and even coordinate the search across borders. Interoperability, however, has yet to be realised. Currently, only 20 EU MS have a Child Alert/AMBER Alert system for missing children in place.

With 37.5% of Europeans living near national borders, it is essential that protocols are examined to ensure they facilitate citizen sourcing in cases of missing children beyond the borders of the originating country.

**Short term priorities:**

- o Research appropriate protocols for notifying the public while also identifying opportunities for interoperable technology;
- o Developing new guidelines, best practices, and initiatives for LEA outreach aimed at engaging the public with law enforcement (citizen sourcing) in the search for a missing child;
- o Develop protocols for cross-border requests for public assistance;
- o Develop a European-wide campaign in order to raise the necessary awareness and promote relevant tools and mechanisms.

**Mid-term priorities:**

- o Piloting the implementation of a website for missing persons and children at high risk inspired by the success of the ENFAST/Europol's Most Wanted website: <https://eumostwanted.eu>;
- o To establish new AMBER Alert/Child Alert systems for MS, coordinated via PEN-MP and AAEU, which support interoperability.

**Pillar 4: Preventing children from going missing as a joint effort of all stakeholders**

Preventing children from going missing and ensuring their safety is the responsibility of all MS. This pillar encapsulates two key elements: Firstly, training and awareness-building of key stakeholders to reduce the number of instances of children going missing; Secondly, determining the reason a child has gone missing as it is a key component to minimising the reoccurrence of instances of children going missing.

LEA are aware that when a child goes missing, it can be a strong indicator of underlying problems such as abuse, sexual exploitation, gender issues, and trafficking. If a child returns and these issues remain unrecognised and untreated, often children go missing again.

In order to prevent this re-victimisation, it is imperative that the risk to the missing child is identified as well as the origins of this risk. This enables a targeted response from LEA to remove or reduce the risk. Not only does this lead to a reduction in the number of incidents, or reoccurring incidents, of children going missing; it also provides LEA the opportunity to identify and address any associated criminal activity.

Prevention efforts, that are also supported by the diligent use of existing mechanisms and build on existing systems, such as the Preventive SIS Alert, should also be examined and promoted since such tools may prevent vulnerable persons, including children, from being moved into harm's way.

**Short term priorities:**

- o Developing and launching European wide prevention campaigns tailored to specific audiences;
- o Developing strategies to raise awareness on the mechanisms developed and launched in cases of missing children/persons;

- o Preventing (re)-victimisation of children by advocating the use of Preventive SIS Alerts among LEA;
- o Implementing best practices of return interviews of missing children.

**Mid-term priorities:**

- o Establishing cooperation with EU Agencies that can serve and contribute to the cause and support the CEA;
- o Implementing European-wide awareness-raising campaigns to prevent children from going missing, moving into harm's way or re-victimisation as a joint effort of all stakeholders.

**About AMBER Alert Europe**

AMBER Alert Europe is a foundation that assists in saving missing children at risk by connecting law enforcement with other police experts and with the public across Europe. AMBER Alert Europe advocates that one missing child is one too many and aims for zero missing children in Europe. AMBER Alert Europe brings together 42 official organisations, public authorities and business entities from 26 countries. The foundation actively contributes to the EU and national policy debate on saving missing children. AMBER Alert Europe also officially facilitates the Police Expert Network on Missing Persons (PEN-MP) and manages PEN-MP's Secretariat. The foundation also harbours the Task Force on AMBER Alerts.

**For more information, please see:** <https://www.amberalert.eu>

## Annex I

<b>Standard activities (all years)</b>		
<b>CEA Pillar</b>	<b>Activity</b>	<b>Objective</b>
Pillar 3	Initiating/facilitating citizen participation	To bring urgent active missing children's cases in Europe to the attention of the public and relevant stakeholders in order to create a wider reach and subsequently increase the likelihood of children being found.
Pillar 1 Pillar 2 Pillar 3 Pillar 4	Webinars	To share new developments and tools as well as awareness raising campaigns related to children's rights, in particular their safety and well-being, missing children, runaways, cybercrime, online child sexual abuse and online child sexual exploitation with target groups and relevant stakeholders.
Pillar 4	Contributing to EU policy	To actively contribute to the EU policy debate on children's safety and well-being, on missing children, runaways, and cybercrime to advocate for better policy and cooperation.
Pillar 1 Pillar 4	Participating in and initiation of research	To map the root causes of issues addressing the safety and well-being of the child, in particular the ones with impact on a child going missing in Europe to get better insights on the issue and the prevention thereof.
Pillar 2	Participating in and initiation of research	To map, gather, analyse and prepare an overview of the total number of missing children in Europe.
Pillar 2	Cooperation with PEN-MP presidency	To work together with the PEN-MP and its presidency, organise events in cooperation with PEN-MP and conduct research with PEN-MP in order to enhance cross-border law enforcement cooperation in Europe.
Pillar 1	Risk triage research	To conduct ongoing research and evaluations of the MPRT model.
Pillar 2	Advocacy	To prevent (re)-victimisation of children by advocating the use of Preventive SIS Alerts among LEA.

<b>Ad hoc activities</b>		
<b>CEA Pillar</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Activity</b>
Pillar 4	2022/2023	Awareness-raising campaign

Pillar 4	2023/2024	Awareness-raising campaign
Pillar 4	2024/2025	Awareness-raising campaign
Pillar 4	2025/2026	School program
Pillar 4	2025/2026	Prevention campaign





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