



Research and Statistical Evidence

Supporting the Need for a Vulnerable Missing Persons Alert Category in Canada · September 2026

This document compiles verified research and statistical evidence supporting the public safety need for a new emergency alert category for vulnerable missing persons in Canada. All statistics have been sourced from peer-reviewed research, government data, and recognized national advocacy organizations.

KEY STATISTICS AT A GLANCE

Finding	Source
1 in 44 Canadian children and youth identified with autism (2023-24)	Public Health Agency of Canada
49% of autistic children attempt to elope at least once after age 4	Anderson et al., Pediatrics 2012
160× more likely to die from drowning than general pediatric population	Columbia University, 2017
91% of U.S. autism wandering fatalities caused by drowning (2024)	National Autism Association
6 in 10 people with Alzheimer's disease will wander at some point	Alzheimer's Association
18× greater wandering prevalence with dementia diagnosis (Canadian data)	Miguel-Cruz et al., 2024
~0 meaningful Silver Alert public activations in Alberta since 2017	Provincial alert records

SECTION 1 — AUTISM AND ELOPEMENT

Prevalence

According to the Public Health Agency of Canada's National ASD Surveillance System, 1 in 44 Canadian children and youth were identified with autism spectrum disorder in 2023-24 — up from 1 in 714 in 2000-2001.

Elopement

The largest published study on elopement in autism (Kennedy Krieger Institute / Interactive Autism Network, published in *Pediatrics* 2012, n=1,218) found:

- 49% of children with autism attempted to elope — nearly 4× the rate of neurotypical siblings.
- More than one-third of children who wander are never or rarely able to communicate their name, address, or phone number.
- 26% of those who eloped were missing long enough to cause serious concern for safety.
- A 2016 review found that nearly a third of elopement incidents resulted in fatalities or required medical attention, with drowning the leading cause.

Drowning Risk

A 2017 Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health study (*American Journal of Public Health*) found children with autism are 160 times more likely to die from drowning than the general pediatric population. The National Autism Association's 2024 data places 91% of U.S. autism wandering fatalities as drowning-related.

SECTION 2 — DEMENTIA AND WANDERING

Prevalence

Statistics Canada estimates approximately 0.8% of Canadians aged 45+ in private households, and 45% of those in long-term residential care, have a dementia diagnosis.

Wandering

The Alzheimer's Association estimates 6 in 10 people with Alzheimer's disease will wander. A 2024 pan-Canadian study (Miguel-Cruz et al., *Alzheimer's & Dementia*, n=1.5M home care clients, 17 years of interRAI data) found a dementia diagnosis associated with 18× greater prevalence of critical wandering. A MedicAlert Canada study of 25,785 subscribers found people with dementia were 2.5× more likely to be involved in a missing incident.

If a person with dementia is not found within 24 hours, up to half will suffer serious injury or death.

SECTION 3 — THE EMERGENCY ALERT GAP

How Alert Ready Works

Canada's Alert Ready system is delivered through the NAAD system operated by Pelmorex. Alert categories and activation criteria are set by individual provinces and territories. The Amber Alert requires evidence of abduction — it was never designed for wandering or elopement cases.

Alberta's Silver Alert — A Cautionary Example

Alberta introduced a Silver Alert category under the *Missing Persons Act* in 2017. Since its introduction, activations have been extremely rare and the program has almost no public awareness — demonstrating that legislative passage alone is insufficient without implementation infrastructure, public education, and consistent activation protocols.

The Structural Gap

- No Amber Alert for wandering/elopement cases — no evidence of abduction, no alert.
- Silver Alert programs exist in some provinces but have very low activation rates and minimal public recognition.
- No standardized, publicly recognized alert category exists for any vulnerable missing person who wanders.

SECTION 4 — INDIGO ALERT: PROPOSED FRAMEWORK

An Indigo Alert is proposed as a narrowly defined, province-by-province alert category activatable when a vulnerable person goes missing due to wandering or elopement, without requiring evidence of abduction. Proposed activation criteria:

- The person relies on caregiver support and cannot self-rescue.
- A cognitive, developmental, or medical condition creates a reasonable belief they cannot recognize danger or communicate their identity and need for help.
- There is no evidence of abduction (distinguishing the Indigo from the Amber Alert).

Delivery would use the Alert Ready / Wireless Emergency Alert (WEA) infrastructure already in place, activated through existing provincial alert authorities.

Full References

1. Anderson C, et al. (2012). Occurrence and Family Impact of Elopement in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders. *Pediatrics*, 130(5). doi: 10.1542/peds.2012-0762
2. National Autism Association. (2024). Drowning Risk After Wandering/Elopement. nationalautismassociation.org/drowning-risk/
3. Alzheimer's Association. (2024). Wandering. alz.org/help-support/caregiving/stages-behaviors/wandering
4. Guan J, Li G. (2017). Injury Mortality in Individuals with Autism. *American Journal of Public Health*, 107(5).
5. Miguel-Cruz A, et al. (2024). Pan-Canadian Estimates of the Prevalence and Risks Associated with Critical Wandering. *Alzheimer's & Dementia*. doi:10.1002/alz.14195
6. Statistics Canada. Health Reports — Dementia prevalence in Canadian households.
7. MedicAlert Canada. SafetyNet Missing Incident Data, cited in internal advocacy materials.
8. Public Health Agency of Canada. National ASD Surveillance System, 2023-24 Annual Report.