

Key information on missing, September 2007

Missing

The charity Missing People estimates there are around 210,000 reports of missing people every year in the UK. We estimate that two thirds of these will be young people aged under 18 (around 140,000 annually).

Between the ages of 13 and 17, girls make up more than two thirds of missing person reports. Over the age of 24, men are much more likely to be reported missing than women.

The Missing People Policy and Research team is working to produce a more accurate estimate of the number of missing people in the UK, based on a range of sources.

Missing People

- In 2006/07, we recorded nearly 22,000 enquiries about missing people (including young people missing from care and notifications from the police)
- We opened over 1,600 actively managed missing people family support cases; and closed nearly 1,500 cases
- Our Missing From Care team worked on nearly 500 active cases of young people missing from contact with social services in 2006/07; and closed 450 cases.
- We directly found an average of 8 every week.
- On the final day of the 2006/07 year, we had 5,700 open cases on our books.
- We helped over 6,200 people calling our Runaway Helpline and Message Home services.
- Missing People has recorded over 4,000 enquiries about missing people aged 16 or under since Madeleine went missing.

Children who go missing

Most cases of missing children are cases where the young person has run away or stayed out without permission (around two thirds). The rest include children who have lost contact with a non-custodial parent or siblings following separation or going into care, parental and other abductions, and children who have been thrown out or forced to leave home because of unbearable circumstances.

Abductions

The Home Office report the number of offences of child abduction recorded by the police every year. Police recorded crime statistics (released in July) show that child abduction (including attempted abduction) fell to 697 cases in England and Wales in 2006/7, a 24 per cent decrease on the previous year, and 33 per cent down on 2004/05.

A study based on 2002/03 data showed that most recorded child abductions are attempted abductions (around half). Most of the remainder (around a quarter of all cases) are parental abductions, in which a parent removes a child without the legal right to do so.

Runaways

An estimated 100,000 young people, aged under 16, run away overnight from home or care every year in the UK.

The large majority of these are between the ages of 13 and 15 (though we have callers to our Runaway Helpline below the age of 10)

A variety of studies have shown that between 5 and 11 per cent of young people run away overnight before the age of 16.

Young people run away for a number of reasons, but studies have found the most common reasons to be:

- conflict with a parent, step parent or family member;
- running away to be with someone such as a boyfriend or girlfriend, or another family member;
- running away to have fun;
- and running away to escape stress and anxiety.

Most young runaways stay with friends or relatives, but one study of young runaways found that more than 15 per cent had slept rough.

Missing from care

Young people living in residential care are around three times more likely to run away than young people living in families. They are also more likely to run away repeatedly.

Studies have found that anywhere between 30 and 70 per cent of young runaways are missing from care. While it is difficult to pinpoint a figure, it is safe to assume that a significant proportion of young runaways are missing from care.

Adults who go missing

It is difficult to count the number of missing adults, because many are not officially reported as missing. While adults make up around a third of missing person reports, many adults are not reported missing to the police because they have drifted out of contact, rather than disappearing suddenly.

The main reasons why adults go missing are:

- Relationship breakdown (around 30 per cent of missing adults)
- Conflicts over autonomy (especially for young adults)
- Escape (to escape a crisis or stress)
- Mental health problems, such as depression
- Alcohol misuse
- Financial worries/job loss
- Undisclosed childhood abuse
- Violence
- Drifting (e.g. moving house and losing contact)
- Transient lifestyles

Found dead / homicide

Less than one per cent of police missing person reports conclude with the missing person being found dead.

Missing People records a higher number of cases resulting in a fatal outcome (around 10 per cent) because the charity tends to become involved with cases after the initial few days (of police investigation) have passed. The risk of a missing person being found dead increases with the duration they are missing.

A Home Office study in 2003 found that the chance of a missing person being the victim of homicide to be around 1 in 7,400.

The risk varies enormously with age. Teenagers faced the lowest risk, simply because of the large numbers going missing relative to the number of cases involving homicide. Young children, below the age of 10, faced at least twice the risk of being the victim of homicide than the average across all ages.

Long term missing people

Around 99 per cent of police missing person cases are resolved within one year. Long term missing people are most likely to be older men, although there are exceptions.