



# Living in Limbo

The experiences of, and impacts on,  
the families of missing people

Lucy Holmes

[www.missingpeople.org.uk](http://www.missingpeople.org.uk)

**missing**  
**people**

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**2008**

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## Foreword



To appreciate the importance of the organisation 'Missing People' all one has to do is put oneself in the place of a parent, partner, or child of someone who has gone missing. Bereavement is bad enough but at least one can come to terms with the finality of that experience. To have someone for whom one cares seemingly disappear off the face of the earth is terrible.

There may be feelings of guilt. Questions such as: 'What did I do wrong?' or 'what ought I to have done that I didn't?' sometimes flood the mind. Then there is that dreadful feeling of simply not knowing. Every face on the underground or in the supermarket is scanned. Every lead is followed. It can be a lonely and demanding road and it is not difficult for individuals to be overwhelmed with a sense of deep and hopeless sadness. 'Living in Limbo' is indeed an apt title for this document.

There are many groups and individuals who do their best to help when such circumstances arise. The police, The Salvation Army and other agencies have a long history of working in this field but there has been a real gap in understanding the experiences of families of missing people. Here, in this research paper, families share their insights and at times the insights can be quite shocking. 'Almost a physical pain' says one person speaking about what they experienced.

It was over four years before my wife and children received news that I was alive and being held in captivity in the Middle East. They were fortunate as they received good support during that trial but I still marvel at their strength and their ability to endure what in fact was an ongoing torture. There are still too many families who simply do not know where to turn to when tragedy strikes and for whom support is patchy to say the least.

This valuable research pulls back the curtain on a scene that is regrettably faced by thousands of people each year. It gives valuable pointers as to what needs to be put in place and strengthened. Lucy Holmes, the author, has performed a valuable service in a field that is seriously under-researched. I hope her report is not only widely read and discussed but that it makes a real contribution to the alleviation of suffering and to the improvement of services and support in the future.

**Terry Waite CBE**



## Acknowledgements

This work took place as part of the Missing People Research Programme, which was launched in the summer of 2007 to provide a UK knowledge focal point in the field of missing people.

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Thanks also to the reviewers of the report for their helpful comments and constructive advice: Kandy Woodfield, Director, NatCen Communications and Learning, and Pauline Boss, Professor Emeritus, University of Minnesota.

The Missing People Research Programme is generously supported by the John Ellerman Foundation.

Many thanks to Clifford Chance for making the production of this report possible.

*“Clifford Chance welcomes the publication of this important report by Missing People on their ground-breaking research into the range of impacts on families left behind when someone goes missing. I have no doubt that the report will mark a landmark in understanding the distress and the needs of the families of missing people. Clifford Chance is a strong supporter of Missing People and the vital and difficult work it does and is proud of the legal and other assistance that it has been able to provide to Missing People over the last few years. I am delighted to be continuing our support at this significant point in Missing People's development by sponsoring the publication of Living in Limbo”.*

Michael Smyth, Partner, Head of Public Policy,  
Clifford Chance LLP

## The author

Lucy Holmes (MA, Edin; MSc, Surrey) is a Policy and Research Officer at Missing People. She has previously undertaken research into the regulation of prostitution; homelessness; pathways into and out of offending (in particular for young people); sentencing policy and deviancy amplification; and gender and offending.



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# Executive summary

## Introduction

Every year police forces in the UK receive in the region of 210,000 reports of missing people. Whilst most are resolved relatively quickly, other disappearances continue for prolonged periods, leaving family members to cope with the pain of not knowing where their loved one is, or what has happened to them.

In 2007/08, the charity Missing People recorded nearly 30,000 enquiries about missing people and opened over 1,000 actively managed missing people family support cases. However, despite the high number of people who go missing in the UK each year, relatively little is known about the day to day experiences of the families they leave behind. In the absence of any UK based research conducted directly with families of missing people about their experiences, this research study has been designed to explore the issues such families face.

## Aims and methods of the study

This small scale, exploratory study aimed to provide a rich and deep account of the ways in which a disappearance can affect a missing person's family members. Qualitative in-depth interviews were conducted with 22 adult participants from 20 families of currently missing adults, all receiving services from Missing People. The missing family members ranged in age from 18 to 70, and the durations for which they had been missing ranged from several months to more than 30 years. More information on the ethical and methodological aspects of this study is provided in Holmes (2008) and in the Technical Appendix to the report, which can be downloaded from the Missing People website at <http://www.missingpeople.org.uk/limbo>

## Context of the research

Missing incidents may be characterised by the degree of 'intent' on the part of the missing person (who may have left intentionally or unintentionally) and the role of external factors (including other people). This is demonstrated by both Payne's typology of 'runaways', 'throwaways', 'pushaways', 'fallaways' and 'takeaways', and Biehal et al's 'missing continuum' (Payne, 1995 and Biehal et al, 2003). In many cases, the missing person's intention may not be fully known or understood by the family members left behind. While this study did not adopt either typology for the purposes of sampling, the distinction between intentional and unintentional absences informed the analysis of the relationship between family members' perceptions of the disappearance and their subsequent emotional experience.

While the experiences of families when someone goes missing are under-researched, there has been some work that has developed relevant concepts. Boss has written extensively on the treatment of families experiencing 'ambiguous loss'; either as a result of a family member going missing and their fate remaining unknown, or an individual being physically present but having lost their personality, for example through dementia (Boss 1999, 2002, 2007). The concept of ambiguous loss provides a framework for analysing stressors, coping strategies and psychosocial impacts (including how family members' mental health and subsequent behaviour is affected by the experience).

## Key findings

The research has identified three key domains of experience faced by the families of missing people: emotional and social experiences; financial, legal and other practical impacts; and experiences with service providers and the media.

### Emotional and social experiences

*“It is like a rollercoaster ride”*

- Families may experience a range of emotions such as sadness, worry, guilt, anger and hope. They can experience 'highs' of hopefulness as well as 'lows' of despair.
- Emotional impacts may result in physical symptoms, such as sleeplessness, stress and deteriorating health.
- Emotional impacts do not diminish over time; families live 'in limbo' as long as their family member remains missing.
- Families' emotional experiences are affected by their perception of the disappearance; whether they believe the person left deliberately, and whether they believe their family member is still alive. What family members believe can affect not only their individual emotions, but also their relationships with other family members.
- Participants described a number of coping strategies they used to try to live with the disappearance. Examples of coping strategies include counselling, medication, religious faith, consulting psychics and mediums, and turning to friends and family. While some families actively seek to tell as many people as possible about the

disappearance, others fear negative reactions and are wary about whom they tell. Experiences varied among participants, indicating that no one approach to coping works for all families.

### Financial, legal and other practical impacts

*“Financially we’re just completely screwed”*

- The cost of conducting their own search affects some families, particularly the search efforts that take place before relevant support services are accessed. Such efforts include producing posters and leaflets and travelling in the UK and abroad.
- Disruption to family members’ work, caused by emotional or practical pressures, can have financial consequences for families.
- The loss of the missing person’s income can have a significant effect for families in which the missing person had financial responsibilities, such as paying bills or supporting other family members.
- Dealing with financial and legal affairs can be costly to the families of missing people, particularly where expert advice is required, as well as being a cause of stress and worry.
- Some family members find themselves in a position of paying the missing person’s bills, or covering their debts, for reasons such as wishing to maintain the missing person’s lifestyle for when they return or fearing the consequences of defaulting on payments.
- A particular area of confusion is that around the length of time for which a person must remain missing before their estate may be administered, their marriage dissolved, or for an official presumption of death to be declared.

### Experiences with service providers and the media

*“We don’t want it to be completely forgotten”*

- Deciding to make an official missing person report can be a difficult and emotional step for families to take.
- A family’s perception of the quality of services provided to them can affect their emotional wellbeing as well as their likelihood of pursuing their own (potentially expensive) enquiries.

- Key influences on families’ satisfaction with service providers are:
  - Whether they believe that everything possible is being done to find the missing person
  - The extent to which they have been taken seriously
  - How well the services they receive meet their initial expectations
  - The personal manner of service providers
  - The quality and consistency of long term contact
  - How well they are kept informed of developments (or lack thereof)
- Families can become confused about arrangements for information sharing between service providers and other organisations and institutions. In particular they may be confused about the extent to which Data Protection procedures act as a barrier to search efforts.
- Families may feel obliged to have contact with the media to maintain publicity about the case. Media contact can prove stressful however, as families seek to portray a sympathetic image of the missing person and their family, and possibly have to confront prejudice and challenge negative assumptions.

## Recommendations

### Improving access to support services

1. Missing People should provide an enhanced range of advice literature for families about the emotional and practical support services provided by the charity, about dealing with media attention, and about other potential sources (in the voluntary and statutory sector) of assistance.
2. Missing People should arrange for the findings from this research to be incorporated, wherever possible, into the training, awareness and professional development programmes of other providers (in the voluntary and statutory sector) of assistance to families of missing people.
3. Missing People should work with relevant government departments and non-departmental public bodies (etc.) to maximise the opportunities for ‘mainstreaming’ a range of support services tailored to the specific needs and circumstances of families of missing people.
4. ACPO and the National Policing Improvement Agency (NPIA) should encourage police forces routinely to inform the family members of

missing people of the range of support services available to them.

5. Consultation with families of missing people should be at the heart of service development and planning.

### **Clarifying the legal and financial position**

6. Legal and financial advice and support should be available to the families of missing people. While this may not be bespoke, some instructions should be provided to direct families to appropriate resources.
7. The benefits (or otherwise) of introducing specific legislation governing the presumption of death in missing person cases in England and Wales should be examined. Any opportunity to provide a robust legal framework for dealing with the estate and other affairs of missing people who are presumed dead, and for improving clarity for family members, should be pursued.

### **Recommendations for the police service**

8. Police forces should note the importance of the initial and continuing police response on the emotional impact on families, particularly with regard to families' concerns that everything possible is done to find the missing person
9. The family members of a missing person should have a clearly identified single point of contact with the police force dealing with their case.
10. Investigating officers should consider families' need to know, as far as possible, what actions have been taken to find their missing family member.

### **Further research**

11. A large scale study based on the findings of this research should be undertaken to estimate the prevalence and extent of the impacts on families, and the costs to left-behind families, and society as a whole, of missing incidents. Such a study could also test the hypothesis, developed by this study, that families' perceptions of whether the disappearance was intentional, and whether the missing person is still alive, inform their coping strategies and emotional reactions to the disappearance.

12. Further research should aim to extend the theoretical framework by examining the impact on families of different types of disappearance, particularly comparing the duration, the characteristics of the missing person, the families' own perceptions of the disappearance and other relevant factors.

13. Press and media attention around cases of people going missing can have a profound impact on the families left behind, and further research should more fully investigate this issue in order to provide advice to service providers, media organisation, and families of missing people.
14. The impact of low or no interest from official agencies, and families' own expectations about services that are available, can affect not only families' emotional wellbeing, but also the extent of the search for the missing person. Further research should be conducted to explore the experiences of families who have little or no contact with the police or other support providers.
15. The main service providers (Missing People and the police service) should conduct evaluations of existing services to assess family members' satisfaction and to identify areas for service development.

# 1. Introduction

Every year police forces in the UK receive in the region of 210,000 reports of missing people. Whilst most are resolved relatively quickly, other disappearances continue for prolonged periods, leaving family members to cope with the pain of not knowing where their loved one is, or what has happened to them.

In 2007/08, the charity Missing People recorded nearly 30,000 enquiries about missing people and opened over 1,000 actively managed missing people family support cases. However, despite the high number of people who go missing in the UK each year, relatively little is known about the day to day experiences of the families they leave behind. In the absence of any UK based research conducted directly with families of missing people about their experiences, this research study has been designed to explore the issues such families face.

## **Aims and methods of the study**

This study was designed to provide an exploratory examination of the range of experiences of, and impacts on, family members left behind when someone goes missing. The study was a small scale, in-depth study of a number of family members' experiences, aiming to provide a rich and deep account of the ways in which the disappearance had affected them.

### *Aims of the study*

- To review the existing research and literature in this under-explored area of the missing people phenomenon.
- To explore and identify the wide range of experiences faced by families left behind by missing people, and the impacts these experiences have on their lives.
- To explore how different missing scenarios produce different impacts for left-behind family members.
- To highlight immediate gaps in service provision for the families of missing people.
- To identify areas for policy development that will alleviate the problems faced by the families of missing people.

### *Methods and participants*

A full ethical review was undertaken, according to the Missing People Research Procedures. During the project the participants have been afforded confidentiality, have given informed consent to take part, and have been free to withdraw from the process at any time.

Qualitative in-depth interviews were conducted with 22 adult participants from 20 families of currently missing adults, who were receiving active case management from Missing People. Fourteen interviews were conducted in person, five by telephone and one by email. Seventeen women and five men were interviewed; five mothers, two fathers, nine siblings (or siblings-in-law) and six sons or daughters of missing people.

The missing family members were: nine women and 11 men; two teenagers, eight 20- to 39-year olds, seven 40- to 59-year olds and three people aged 60 years or more. Three of the missing people had been gone for less than one year, seven had been missing for one to three years, six had been missing for four to ten years, and four had been missing for more than ten years.

More information on the ethical and methodological aspects of this study is provided in Holmes (2008) and in the Technical Appendix to the report, which can be downloaded from the Missing People website at <http://www.missingpeople.org.uk/limbo>

### *Interview topics*

- The missing person; character, circumstances and relationships
- The disappearance; the events leading up to and immediately following the disappearance
- The aftermath; what the family experienced in the days and weeks after the disappearance
- Reactions; telling people and the reactions the family received
- Emotional experiences; emotional, physical, social and family experiences and impacts
- Practical experiences; financial, legal and practical impacts resulting from the disappearance and the search
- Support services; experience with the police (if applicable), Missing People, the media and any other statutory, voluntary or informal support providers
- Recommendations; the services interviewees would recommend are offered to families of missing people

### *Analysis*

Interviews were coded and explored using QSR NVivo 7 and analysed according to the principles of Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

## Structure of the report

Families of missing people face a wide range of experiences and impacts, which can extend to a number of family members and affect every aspect of their lives. Their experiences and emotions are interconnected; practical problems can have a deep emotional impact, while the effort of dealing with a variety of emotions can have an impact on families' lifestyles, jobs, education and relationships. In order to highlight the key types of experiences and impacts this report is divided into: emotional and social experiences; financial, legal and other practical issues; and experiences with service providers. However, it is important to consider that these realms of experience strongly influence each other, and families of missing people face them at the same time and over time.

The following chapter of this report describes the context of the research, including relevant concepts and theories from the wider international literature review, and the policy and practice setting in the UK. Chapter 3 describes the interviewees' emotional and social experiences, including how their family relationships have been affected, the emotional support they have received, and the effects of the passage of time. Chapter 4 outlines the financial and legal issues that interviewees have faced, including the impact of any loss of income and any expenses they have incurred as a result of the disappearance. Chapter 5 concerns the experiences interviewees had with the police, Missing People, the media and with other relevant agencies. Finally, Chapter 6 provides a summary and sets out recommendations for further research and for policy and practice.



## 2. The context of the research

### Missing people

People of all ages and from all walks of life go missing in the UK. One of the toughest challenges facing researchers and policy makers in the field has been finding a suitable definition. Someone can only be categorised as a missing person by people they have left behind: “There is certainly an implicit recognition by the police and by missing persons agencies of the problematic nature of a definition that originates with those left behind” (Biehal, Mitchell and Wade, 2003: 2). This may be problematic in that it may disguise serious or legitimate reasons for a disappearance, and a definition based solely on people left behind may fail to capture the wide variety of reasons for going missing, and the fact that someone may only be ‘missing’ to one particular person or group of people, while other people may be aware of, or concealing, their whereabouts.

A sociological definition of going missing is provided by Payne (1995): “A social situation in which a person is absent from their accustomed network of social and personal relationships to the extent that people within that network define the absence as interfering with the performance by that person of expected social responsibilities, leading to a situation in which members of the network feel obliged to search for the missing person and may institute official procedures to identify the person as missing” (Payne, 1995: 335). This definition suggests that in order for someone to be defined as missing the people they have left behind should be actively trying to discover their whereabouts.

The Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) provides a more operational definition of a missing person: “Anyone whose whereabouts is unknown whatever the circumstances of disappearance. They will be considered missing until located and their wellbeing or otherwise established” (ACPO, 2005: 8). This definition not only acknowledges that people go missing in a range of circumstances, but also that they will continue to be considered missing until there is evidence of their whereabouts.

For the purposes of this study families were selected on the basis of their involvement with Missing People. By making contact with the charity all of the families had instituted the search for their missing family member that Payne’s definition requires. None of them were aware of their missing family member’s whereabouts, and none had received sufficient evidence of their wellbeing to call a halt to the search, so complying with the ACPO definition. However, this study has not sought to refine the definition of missing,

nor has it sought to sample families on the basis of particular missing scenarios.

Two typologies of missing people have been constructed that are important for understanding how and why people go missing. Payne (1995) provided a typology to categorise missing people by the circumstances in which they went missing. This typology defines missing people by way of five categories: ‘runaways’ who have deliberately gone missing; ‘throwaways’ who went missing following rejection; ‘pushaways’ who were forced to leave; ‘fallaways’ who lost contact; and ‘takeaways’ who were removed by someone else (Payne, 1995: 337).

Biehal et al (2003) later constructed the ‘missing continuum’, from intentional to unintentional, ranging from ‘decided’, through ‘drifted’, and ‘unintentional absence’ to ‘forced’. The continuum demonstrates that each missing incident is underpinned by a degree of intent on the part of the missing person, and differing degrees of impact from external factors (including other people). Both of these typologies indicate how important it is to understand and appreciate that missing people may or may not have chosen to go missing, and that their degree of intent may or may not be fully known and understood by the people they left behind.

While this research has not adopted either typology for the purposes of sampling, the distinction between intentional and unintentional absences has informed the analysis, and the development of Figure 1 on page 26.

Missing incidents can also differ significantly in terms of duration and outcome. Around three-quarters of missing person reports are resolved within two days, and 99 per cent are resolved within one year (Tarling and Burrows, 2004: 20). However, the remainder can stay missing for very much longer than a year. In terms of outcome, most missing people either return to the place they left or are found alive. However, around 0.6 per cent of missing person cases are resolved when the missing person is found to have died (Missing People, 2007). Others are likely to have died but the body never located.

### The impact of going missing on families left behind

While the experiences of families when someone goes missing are under-researched, there has been some work that has developed relevant concepts. The concept of ambiguous loss has been designed to underpin the design of counselling practice for families

experiencing such loss and trauma. Similarly, limited previous research in the UK and overseas has examined some of the impacts families report to service providers when a family member is missing. Little work has been done fully to explore the ways in which people cope with a family member being missing, although Boss (1999, 2002, 2007) has outlined a number of protective characteristics that help individuals to deal with ambiguous loss. Finally, while service providers have made efforts to explore the types of services that could assist the families of missing people, little empirical research has taken place into this aspect of the problem.

### **Ambiguous loss**

When families, partners and friends are left behind when someone goes missing, their loss is one filled with uncertainty and ambiguity. The lack of information or 'closure' means that the loss is not experienced in the same way as, for example, bereavement. Boss (1999, 2002, 2007) has labelled this type of loss 'ambiguous loss', in an attempt to delineate and examine the feelings and experiences of those who are left behind. Boss identified two types of ambiguous loss:

*"The first is when a person is physically absent yet psychologically present [...] Family members may not know if the person is still alive or the state of his or her wellbeing. [...] The second kind of ambiguous loss involves someone being physically present but psychologically absent."*

Betz and Thorngren, 2006: 359

Where the second type could be applied to, for example, people with Alzheimer's disease or dementia, the first type of ambiguous loss accurately describes the loss experienced by the families and friends of missing people. The impact of ambiguous loss can be serious and long lasting:

*"Being confused, unable to grieve, feeling ambivalent, denying the idea of 'closure' – all are natural reactions to ambiguous loss. [...] Ambiguity can become lifelong trauma if it continues incessantly."*

Boss, 2002: 16

The concept of ambiguous loss provides a framework for analysing stressors, coping strategies and psychosocial impacts (including how family members' mental health and subsequent behaviour is affected by the experience). The concept also has the potential

to be useful as a basis for developing interventions and service provision to people experiencing ambiguous loss.

### **The range of impacts**

Researchers have recognised that while missing people themselves can face a variety of risks, the people they leave behind can also experience a range of difficulties.

*"In the short term, the people calling the [Missing People] Helpline talk of great confusion and distress. Emotions may be very near the surface. These emotional problems continue. There may be guilt, because members of the family blame themselves for the person going missing, anger about their going, and anxiety about how the missing person is going to cope. [...] People say that they are 'in limbo' because nothing about this problem in their lives can be resolved. It is such resolution that they want above all, and the emphasis in the help that they demand with tracing is a sign of this need".*

Payne, 1995: 343-4

As well as the feelings of loss, previous research suggests that practical problems can arise, both as a result of the emotional impact of the ambiguous loss, and because of the loss of the missing person's income. Again, while these risks have been identified previously, very little empirical work has taken place with families in the UK to explore how these financial impacts have affected the families of missing people.

*"...families and friends (and in some cases the missing persons themselves) suffer significant health, work, quality of life, emotional, relationship, economic, and other impacts associated with the missing person incident".*

Henderson et al, 2000: 4

*"Families 'left behind' by adults may have severe practical problems, since bank accounts of a family breadwinner may become inaccessible and it may prove difficult to claim social security benefits. [...] Practical and financial problems also continue and may worsen as immediate resources are exhausted".*

Payne, 1995:343-4



## Coping

Researchers have recognised a number of behaviours and feelings that left-behind families might experience, although there has been relatively little work that has looked specifically at the issue of coping for families of missing people. Boss identified certain characteristics that seemed to help people cope with ambiguous loss:

*“Preliminary research in this area suggest that persons who tolerate best this kind of loss may have one or more of the following qualities:*

- *They were socialized in a culture less oriented toward mastery, control, and finding answers to all questions [...]*
- *They are deeply spiritual and don't feel helpless when they can't understand a situation [...]*
- *They are able to hold two opposing ideas in their mind at the same time [...]*”

Boss, 2002: 17

Boss also highlights the importance of ritual and ceremonies, and official ‘authorisation’, an example of which is the offer of “certificates of presumed death” to families of those lost in the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001 (Boss, 2002).

## Recent policy and practice context

To date, most policy development in the field of missing people has concerned the efficacy of the police response (e.g. Newiss, 1999; Hedges, 2002; ACPO, 2005), and the multi-agency response to young runaways from home or care (e.g. Social Exclusion Unit, 2002; Department of Health, 2002; The Children's Society, 2007). In contrast, the experiences and needs of, and support provided to, families of missing people have attracted little policy discourse.

Non-governmental organisations have played a crucial role in providing services to the families of missing people. Missing People, registered as a charity in 1993, provides emotional and practical support to families via a dedicated helpline. The importance of this role in complementing the police response and filling what would otherwise be a key gap in services to families has been acknowledged in various reviews and guidance documents (Compass Partnership, 2000; Nove, 2005; ACPO, 2005). Reunite, formed in 1986, provides more specialist assistance to family members coping with the abduction of a child overseas by another family member.

ACPO guidance (2005) implicitly recognises that direct family support cannot be provided by the police to the families of every missing person. Those cases in which a Family Liaison Officer (FLO) is appointed are likely to include investigations involving a heavy demand on the family, both in terms of providing detailed information to the police and dealing with the media. In cases where an FLO is not appointed, police are advised to provide families with a specified named contact (ACPO, 2005: 33). Police forces are encouraged to refer family members requiring support to Missing People, and a national protocol has been implemented to facilitate this process (ACPO, 2005).

This research will inform an internal Missing People review of support services provided to families of missing people. Findings from previous research have already indicated that families are likely to require a range of services beyond those which are currently available. Improving knowledge of, and access to, services is likely to form part of new policy and practice agenda in this area:

*“The need for effective support services for families and friends of missing persons was the single issue raised most consistently in the survey and interviews. The type of support identified varied from acute emotional crisis support to specialised support specific to the needs of families and friends of long-term missing cases”.*

Henderson et al, 2000: 6

*“Families will therefore have continuing needs for advice, information and perhaps counselling. Voluntary agencies that provide telephone support services to the families of missing people can provide for these needs successfully. However, some families may also need access to professional counselling where a missing episode has a serious impact on the coping abilities of individuals or families. Some concerns have been raised about the degree to which families may be informed about the services that are available (Compass Partnership, 2000). The provision of information to families may be improved if all police forces had brochures covering local and national services and made these available to families at the time a missing person's report is first made. Henderson and Henderson (1998) also suggest a potential role for family support groups to provide practical and emotional support, especially in longer term cases.”*

Biehal et al, 2003: 52-3

### 3. Emotional and social experiences

Families of missing people experience a range of emotional and social impacts. These result not only from the emotional trauma of their family member's disappearance, but also from the financial, legal and practical impacts, and from their experiences dealing with the police, other agencies and the media.

#### Personal experiences

Each of the research participants described their own personal experiences in great depth. For each of the interviewees there had been a significant emotional impact of their family member going missing. A wide range of emotional experiences and feelings were described, including sadness, guilt, anger, hope and relief, with participants reporting feeling a mixture of conflicting emotions at the same time, and at different points in time. As well as experiencing emotional turmoil, the worry and stress can lead to physical impacts, including sleeplessness and worsening ill health.

*“Just tears and tears and tears”*

Sadness was described as a constant underlying feeling, and as a feeling that re-emerged at particular times, such as birthdays, Christmas and anniversaries, and at seemingly random times. Sadness can lie dormant before being reawakened by seeing a photograph or hearing a song.

*“It wasn't as though I was thinking of suicide, but I had never in my life, and still haven't experienced such excruciating pain.”*  
(Mother of a missing man)

*“Obviously there was just tears and tears and tears.”*  
(Sister of a missing man)

*“...you can just be pottering along when all of a sudden you look at something or hear something and you just, you know, you become very upset.”*  
(Daughter of a missing man)

*“...sometimes, if something comes on the television that might spark something and I'll just say to [my husband] 'you'll have to excuse me I'm going out for a blub'. I might just disappear for five or ten minutes then I'm fine.”*  
(Sister of a missing man)

*“It is like a rollercoaster ride”*

Families experience a range of emotions; both a mixture of feelings at the same time, and changes in emotions over time. Experiencing mixed feelings means that families struggle to reconcile anger and frustration with sadness, hope, relief or worry. Not only can these feelings coincide, but different feelings can surface on different days. This changing nature of emotions was described as a “rollercoaster”, capturing the high points and low points that characterise the experience of ambiguous loss. However, this is tempered by the fact that even the high points are still overshadowed by the inescapable burden of worry for the missing person.

*“...one day you might be really upset, the next day you're really angry at him.”*  
(Sister of a missing man)

*“You do get your highs, you do get your hopes up, and you do get your downs, it is like a rollercoaster ride.”*  
(Mother of a missing woman)

*“...there's days when you can't get it out of your head, and it, it's just constantly there.”*  
(Daughter of a missing woman)

*“You don't know what to do, you don't know what they're doing, you don't know where they are, and it's just the complete, kind of, mystery of it, the void of action and void of feeling, because you don't know what to feel really. You don't know whether to grieve, or to be angry with them or whether to be desperately worried, and you're a combination of all of those things at all times.”*  
(Sister of a missing man)

*“We also felt guilty”*

Guilt was described in a variety of ways by interviewees. Feeling guilty had its origins in four key areas:

- Guilt for not having prevented the disappearance
- Guilt for having possibly caused the disappearance
- Guilt for not discovering the disappearance quickly enough
- Guilt for not doing more to find the missing person.

The first two of these origins of guilt relate to events before the disappearance, and are therefore irreconcilable without reunion. The third is similarly in the past and impossible to alter. The final origin, guilt for not doing more to search, is more easily

transferred, either into frustration with external agencies or into increased action.

Guilt was not perceived to be a useful emotion, particularly where there is no evidence that anything could have been done to prevent the disappearance.

*“... other than wishing I’d made those phone calls and you know, that I had done things differently [...] that he had been looked for on the Wednesday night, if that is when he went, you know, probably more about what... I didn’t do. And why didn’t I do that.”*

(Daughter of a missing man)

*“We also felt guilty because we didn’t realise how bad she was [...] you do look back and you think ‘I should’ve done this and I should’ve done that’ but it’s not very helpful.”*

(Daughter of a missing woman)

*“I think it is ‘cause you’re constantly searching yourself, as well, because you don’t know, you try and put a reason on it and of course you go through every minute thing in your mind, you know, is it because I did this, is it because I didn’t do that?”*

(Mother of a missing woman)

*“I suppose the thing that troubles me most is the sense that whether I ought to have been physically out there on the streets, going to the soup kitchens, the homeless shelters and things, and actually scanning the faces of the people. Erm, I was told early on by the police not to, just because they said it will be incredibly upsetting, unpleasant, erm, needle in the haystack, and you’re incredibly unlikely. You’re just so unlikely that you’re going to be putting yourself through something that isn’t going to yield anything and is going to be very upsetting. Which I don’t necessarily think is the right reason for not having done it, and I, it’s always sort of bothered me that a) I’m still not doing it or b) haven’t done it.”*

(Sister of a missing man)

### “I was angry”

Analysis of interview data revealed that anger is an emotion that was perceived to be less socially desirable, or acceptable, than sadness or guilt. Feelings of anger were reported, but were described as fleeting and were accompanied by justification and balanced by caring concern.

However, anger with the missing person was a common reaction amongst interviewees. This anger

was extended towards the missing person for putting the family through such a harrowing experience, or for choosing to leave without explanation. Importantly, anger was an emotion that was linked by interviewees to the belief about whether the missing person had left intentionally or not. For those who believed the missing person had left of their own accord, the anger was more sustained and accompanied by frustration and feelings of rejection. For those who believed the missing person had gone missing unintentionally, anger was more short lived, and replaced by other emotions.

*“I just couldn’t believe this is my child has done this, so I was angry at [him]. I was furious. I just wanted to bloody kill him, you know, for putting us through this and I think once I start thinking a little more rationally, that anger subsided.”*

(Mother of a missing man)

*“Then a bit angry I suppose. Well, why is she gone? What is she, you know... Yeah I remember I got at one point quite upset, and I was saying something about ‘oh, I’m quite angry.’ And my brother said, ‘well you can’t be angry with her because she wasn’t herself.”*

(Daughter of a missing woman)

*“I think we all wish she would make contact so we can work out why she did it this way. No one I have told that knows [her] can understand how she could leave [...] I personally can’t think what could be so serious to just leave as she did and just cut off from everybody. I feel sometimes angry at how she did it.”*

(Brother of a missing woman)

*“...there came a stage for me when I got quite angry with him, really, for having been so bloody stupid to get to this state, to live on the streets when it’s so not necessary. You know, I’m not saying that we’re going to set him up and support him or whatever it is, but he has a family who love him and who will help him make something that’s got to be better than that for him.”*

(Sister of a missing man)

### “No news is good news isn’t it?”

Feeling hopeful was a characteristic emotion, but it was displayed by interviewees in a range of ways. Hope was described both as a dutiful, respectful maintenance of a positive outlook, and as a more heartfelt belief that the missing person was likely to be found at some point. An example of the more dutiful

approach was the ‘no news is good news’ rationalisation. Some interviewees suggested that because their family member remained missing, there was still a very small part of them that had to go on hoping. For others the hope was more grounded in evidence that the missing person had left on their own without the involvement of anyone else, and the belief that they would have the ability to survive alone. Finally, hope was also linked to the search for understanding, achieving closure, and to finding the missing person’s remains, even if the missing person was not alive.

*“I say you’ve got to think positive.”*  
(Sister-in-law of a missing man)

*“You feel hopeful, but you feel devastated. Hopeful because you hope they’re going to find him.”*  
(Brother of a missing man)

*“There’s still that 1% in your head telling you ‘well maybe it’s not true’. You know maybe he’ll still turn up. And I think it will always be that way.”*  
(Mother of a missing man)

*“...no news is good news isn’t it?”*  
(Sister-in-law of a missing man)

### “Almost a physical pain”

As well as experiencing emotional disturbance and pain, the loss can manifest itself in more physical pain or symptoms. These symptoms include sleeplessness, raised blood pressure and generalised or worsening ill health. Worsening ill health was particularly observed amongst older and previously unwell family members, but the disappearance was cited as an exacerbating influence.

Sleeplessness was caused partly by the constant waiting for news, particularly bad news, which could come at any time. Disturbed sleep, or inability to sleep, was also caused by not being able to stop thinking about the missing person and the disappearance. In particular, interviewees described thinking about different scenarios and possible reasons for the disappearance, and for some this thoughtfulness resulted in problems getting to sleep.

*“...his Dad was poorly but to look at him now, he’s worse.”*  
(Sister-in-law of a missing man)

*“...it’s probably, for her, from what she’s said, it’s more shown itself in sort of physical, erm, you know, her blood pressure had gone up,*

*that sort of thing. So I think the stress has shown itself in that way, she’s having difficulty sleeping at night.”*  
(Daughter of a missing man)

*“I knew the anniversary was coming up yesterday, and the night before I just couldn’t sleep. I was in bed, and my brain just wouldn’t switch off.”*  
(Daughter of a missing woman)

*“You can’t sleep because ... every car that comes up the road you think it’s the police going to come and knock on your door.”*  
(Sister of a missing man)

## Family and relationships

As well as describing the individual, personal experiences of themselves and their relations, interviewees also talked about the effect the disappearance had on the family as a whole, and on relationships between family members. Interviewees came from a range of family structures and sizes, and they described differing levels of closeness in the family both prior to and after the disappearance.

### “I was thrown into having to talk”

Some families experience more problematic internal relationships when a family member goes missing. This is not necessarily linked to any particular family characteristics, and can be caused by different individual emotional reactions, such as disagreeing over whether the missing person is likely still to be alive. There is further discussion of the importance of perceptions of a disappearance later in this section of the report. An example of family members experiencing different emotional reactions was given by an interviewee who described a change in her relationship with her daughter, which had deteriorated for a time after her son’s disappearance as a result of their different emotional responses and perceptions. Others described the impact of the change in communication required during the search and longer term.

*“It’s never been a brilliant relationship but I was thrown into having to talk about emotions with [our mother] and I found that quite difficult because it’s not something we do as a family. We don’t talk about things like that. So I found that quite difficult, and I still do.”*  
(Sister of a missing man)

While negative changes to family relationships can occur, positive changes were also identified as a direct



result of a family member disappearing. Increased communication between previously estranged family members and improved communication between family members left behind were attributed both to a practical need for collaboration during the search, and to a desire to make more effort with each other, to appreciate each other, and to comfort each other. One interviewee also mentioned the reduction in the care burden on her following her father's disappearance, and commented that this had improved her ability to care for her mother.

*"[My husband] is actually closer to the girls now than I think he would have been, you know, he's been more open with them and doing more with them and... You know, he was always close to the family anyway but this seems to have made a big big impact on him."*  
(Mother of a missing man)

*"But since then I think, I know that we're a lot closer. I'm closer to my parents now than I was."*  
(Sister of a missing woman)

## Reactions of friends, colleagues and others

An important aspect of families' experiences is the need to inform other people of the disappearance: family members; friends; their own and the missing person's colleagues; and neighbours and other acquaintances. The expected, feared or actual reaction that is received can have a profound impact on the families of missing people. Reactions were mostly described as shocked, or not knowing how to react. Interviewees were aware of how unusual it is to have a family member missing for a long period, and recognised that other people were not sure how to react. A mixture of reactions were described, including very positive and supportive help with searching or encouragement to stay positive, nosiness and curious conjecture, and negative hopelessness and advice to be realistic.

*"Very shocked. But, erm, yeah. Some of them don't know what to say to you, err, and that... Sometimes they wait for you to say what you're thinking so they know then what to say back."*

(Daughter of a missing woman)

***"It's just nice if people are concerned"***

Positive reactions were appreciated, even when people were unsure of how to respond to the news. Interviewees described valuing the knowledge that

other people were thinking about them, and that they shared the family's concern for the missing person. Positive reactions that included practical support, such as assistance distributing posters or leaflets, were of particular value.

*"I tell the story now 'cause I'm alright with it. And they're quite sympathetic, and that's nice."*

(Brother of a missing man)

*"...it's just nice if people are concerned. It is of some value to you socially and personally isn't it?"*

(Father of a missing man)

*"...they've been absolutely lovely and people just say, that you don't see for months on end, they sort of say 'is he home yet? Have you heard from him?' And everybody is really concerned. Quite amazing really."*

(Sister of a missing man)

***"I've had horrid comments made"***

Not all experiences of telling people were positive. Although rare, interviewees did describe receiving negative reactions from people they spoke to about the disappearance.

*"We've got all these different thoughts going round, that make sense to us, but when we say them to other people they think we've lost the plot."*

(Sister-in-law of a missing man)

*"I've had horrid comments made over the years where people just don't think."*

(Daughter of a missing woman)

*"You've got some people that are still, like, encouraging you to keep on believing, and then you've got others who would turn round and say 'look, you've got to accept it, she's obviously dead, you know, she wouldn't have done this to you' and all that."*

(Daughter of a missing woman)

***"I am very guarded"***

More common than receiving negative reactions was the choice not to tell people for fear of a negative reaction. This was particularly linked to the worry that other people might wonder how the family could have let it happen, or what they had done to make the person want to go missing. Concern about negative reactions also prompted the desire to manage the missing person's public image effectively. This was

important to families who had dealings with the media as part of the search process, but also to families who sought to maintain the missing person's reputation.

Fearful reactions were also discussed as an inhibiting factor to telling a large range of people. Fearing negative reactions was linked to believing that the missing person had left deliberately. In cases where the families believed the missing person had gone missing unintentionally it was more important to publicise the case as widely as possible. In cases of intentional disappearance more risk was perceived in telling acquaintances.

*"It's different when they're tots and they go missing because, you've got no embarrassment, it's in no way your fault. But with an older person, socially it does have a reaction. And you think 'god, I would never have thought of that.' Really is awkward."*  
(Mother of a missing woman)

*"I am very guarded in terms of who I tell about it. Because I'm quite protective of [her] as well so people make assumptions."*  
(Daughter of a missing woman)

*"Whether it was a reaction I really got from people or whether I was kind of aware there could be an implicit criticism in having [...] enabled [him] to get to that state. You know, I felt that perhaps Mum and I were slightly culpable in allowing it to have ever got to this stage. [...] But you do question yourself and therefore you have to, I think you probably have to assume that other people are sort of going 'well how could it happen? How could, how could a family lose?' Because they think... They look at their own family and they look and think 'it's inconceivable that I could lose my brother, how could you lose a family member?' But until it happens you just don't know."*  
(Sister of a missing man)

## Perceptions of the disappearance

Families of missing people are often left behind without any evidence of what has happened to their loved one. Where there has been no message left behind, and there are no strong indications that they have been forcibly removed, guesswork fills the void. Part of the families' thinking about the disappearance concerns whether the missing person left intentionally or unintentionally.

An earlier study of missing people, conducted using

information from the Missing People database, found that around two-thirds of missing adults left deliberately. The remainder either went missing unintentionally, or drifted out of contact with family. Of those who were unintentionally missing, around half of these missing people had experienced dementia or other mental health problems (Biehal et al, 2003: 14).

The families interviewed for this project were unable to state categorically whether or not their family member had gone missing deliberately, but analysis of interviews showed a tendency for families to believe they knew whether or not the disappearance was intentional.

***"If he wants to be found, he'll be found"***

Going missing intentionally was either suggested by interviewees because they believed their family member had left to start a life elsewhere, or because they suspected that the missing person had left intending to take their own life. Importantly the family often had no confirmation of this, so most relied on evidence left behind or on their own knowledge of the missing person's character or state of mind.

*"I think early on we decided that she had decided to break contact. Because I still believe that nothing has happened to her."*  
(Father of a missing woman)

*"We're doing as much as we can do then. Obviously if he wants to be found, he'll be found. If he doesn't then...it's up to him."*  
(Brother of a missing man)

*"We think she's taken herself off somewhere."*  
(Sister of a missing woman)

*"...her old friends obviously came into my shop and were like 'have you heard from [her]?' 'No. Have you not?' And then everybody realised she had cut everything. All her ties."*  
(Mother of a missing woman)

*"...we don't really want to accept it, but we are, it's quite possible that Mum's committed suicide. That... We can't imagine her... Well she's got no financial support or anything, you can't imagine her living anywhere without being in contact with her family. So we're... trying to be realistic."*  
(Daughter of a missing woman)

The belief that a missing person has left deliberately raises two significant problems. Firstly, the family left behind are forced to consider that their family

member's life had been, in some way, unbearable. This is connected to two of the origins of feelings of guilt: guilt for not having prevented the disappearance; and fear of having caused the disappearance.

Secondly, rejection is an issue for families who believe their family member has left deliberately. While this may be tempered by knowledge of the missing person having any mental health problems, the feeling of rejection and belief that the missing person has left deliberately are linked to feelings of anger towards the missing person.

In addition to these problems, the belief that the missing person has left deliberately poses the issues of how to explain the disappearance to other people, how to protect the missing person's reputation and image, and the fear of negative reactions from people who hear about the disappearance.

**“I just don't think, for one minute, that she would just up and go”**

An alternative belief, that the missing person had gone missing unintentionally, was suggested by interviewees either because they believed that the disappearance was caused by the missing person's mental health problems, or because they believed that the missing person had been the victim of crime or accident. Interviewees described how the missing person would never have left deliberately, without informing them, because of family commitments and loyalty. For example, one interviewee was sure that her missing brother-in-law would never have left his housebound father deliberately.

The belief that the missing person had gone missing unintentionally can help to ensure that the memory of the missing person's relationship with the family is protected, and the family are spared the feeling of rejection. However, the belief that the missing person had gone missing unintentionally does not encourage hopefulness that they are still safe and well.

*“More inclined that she, she, that something has happened to her. Not, just disappeared. Because I just don't think, for one minute, that she would just up and go.”*

(Daughter of a missing woman)

*“...he must have, I don't know, blacked out, lost his memory, 'cause there's no possible way, knowing [him], that he'd do this to all of us.”*

(Sister-in-law of a missing man)

*“It is highly likely that he went for a walk and he became confused, or he became confused*

*and went for a walk or something that just sadly hasn't been found where ever he's ended up.”*

(Daughter of a missing man)

**“We're thinking the worst”**

As well as making assumptions about whether their family member had left deliberately, families also sought to decide whether they believed the missing person to be alive or dead. In the absence of any certainty, believing the missing person to be either alive or dead did not bring particular comfort. As described in Wayland (2007), some families felt that death was the only possible outcome of the disappearance, while still acknowledging that only proof of death would allow them fully to accept and come to terms with their loss.

Those families who did not believe their family member would leave deliberately, and those who believed their family member to be particularly vulnerable, found that after the initial hopeful period they became less and less convinced that the missing person was still alive. Feelings about whether the missing person is still alive are closely related to feelings about whether or not they left deliberately. While the belief that a family member would never traumatise their family by going missing deliberately, the logical conclusion to draw from that is that the missing person is no longer alive.

*“Right from the start I just presumed that something had happened to her. Because I know, I mean, we are a close knit family, but I was the closest to my Mum. So, I know... I knew, I knew things like she wouldn't go anywhere without her handbag.”*

(Daughter of a missing woman)

*“And then I think it suddenly hit me, and that all I can remember is it was August and I was sitting in there (sitting room) talking to, erm, someone, and I just thought 'oh my god he's dead'.”*

(Mother of a missing man)

*“The initial part when we all knew he was missing, to be honest we all thought, we all thought he was dead. We thought because we couldn't find him, and nobody's been in touch and it was that serious, we can't find him, something's happened.”*

(Sister-in-law of a missing man)

*“And, it's, there is sightings, so she must have been alive. She didn't die straight away, well we hope she didn't. I don't think she's alive*

*now though. [...] I just think that she's passed on now, I've just got that feeling."*

(Daughter of a missing woman)

## The passage of time

In terms of the emotional impact of a family member going missing, the passage of time has significant effects on family members. In the early stages of the missing incident time passing makes it less likely that the person will be found. Previous research has found that around three-quarters of missing person cases are solved within 48 hours, and 99 per cent within one year (Tarling and Burrows, 2004). The police response also tends to change over time for lower risk cases, diminishing once the initial search has taken place, and this change in service provision can evoke a further emotional response.

As well as the decreased likelihood of a swift resolution to the case, and the change in service provision, families of missing people face the problem of how to deal with an ongoing yet unsolved problem.

**“He'll never ever get over it ever”**

Unlike the loss of a loved one through death, which can change over time towards acceptance and less acute pain, the pain of a family member being missing may not become any less acute as time passes. Interviewees described how the sadness does not diminish into acceptance in the same way, owing to the uncertainty about the outcome for the missing person.

*"Well nothing has bloody well changed. You don't... I don't feel any different to the day he went missing, you know, he's just here."*

(Mother of missing man)

*"[My father will] never ever get over it ever. It'll be 14 years in January and he's still as sad today as he was [14] years ago. [...] it's yesterday in your mind."*

(Sister of missing woman)

**“It's a little bit like a torture”**

The process of dealing with a missing incident was compared to the process of coping with bereavement after a death, but without the eventual recovery and coming to terms with the loss. Interviewees rejected the idea that time can heal all hurt, instead describing the pain as ongoing, as keenly felt after a long period as it was at the outset. Previous research has identified this distinction between the grieving process following death, and that the lack of resolution to a

missing incident means that the grieving process is suspended. Payne (1995) identified that “there is a well-recognised process by which people come to terms with grief [...] In the case of someone going missing, however, this process may be interrupted, because there can be no certainty that a loss has actually occurred or that it might not soon be reversed, so that the stage of disbelief and anger cannot be surmounted.” (Payne, 1995: 343-4)

*"The overwhelming thing, I think, was with a bereavement there's a process to follow. With, with anything, with a divorce, there's a process to follow. I think with any of life's major upsets there's a fairly set, erm, not a manual on how to feel or what to do, but others have gone there before. With somebody going missing, because there's no closure, it's very difficult to know, kind of, what to do."*

(Sister of a missing man)

This lack of closure was described by interviewees as being ‘in limbo’; unable to grieve without the certainty and ritual of death and burial, yet unable to recover from the pain of the loss without knowing the missing person’s whereabouts or condition. In this situation certainty becomes the most important goal. Interviewees illustrated this by explaining that finding the missing person’s body would be a better outcome than never finding out what happened to them. Although families hoped that their loved one would be found alive, finding a body would still be preferable to the prolonged pain of uncertainty.

*"[His] body turning up is just not the worst thing anymore. [His] body turning up would be a relief."*

(Mother of a missing man)

*"Ok, if you lose somebody, they die and it's devastating, but there is time when you can move from that. Maybe not move on but accept it. I think when somebody's just missing it's just hanging there. You don't really know. It's a little bit like a torture."*

(Sister of a missing woman)

*"The not knowing is the anguish. Not having closure."*

(Daughter of a missing woman)

Not only does the lack of certainty affect the families in the present, but not knowing whether they will ever find any answers means that families also face an uncertain future of indefinite suffering. This affects families’ ability to make plans, to look forward to events or celebrations, or to anticipate and plan their life choices.



*“It’s not like something you know there’s an end to and you know what that end will be. [...] So, it’s a journey. And you, you, you’ve not got a specific destination, it’s quite strange. Whereas most other fields of your life you’ve got a rough idea of where you’re going.”*

(Mother of a missing woman)

*“...as the time has gone, you kind of go into a different phase of then being just completely and utterly bewildered that there has been no result. And then almost maybe adjusting to ‘well maybe this is the reality that this could be how it’s going to be’.”*

(Daughter of missing man)

*“It could be that you never find out, and that’s the worst, knowing that twenty years down the line I still might not know whatever happened to her.”*

(Daughter of a missing woman)

As well as feeling the need for answers to alleviate the pain of uncertainty, families may also live in fear of finding out what has happened to their loved one, in case the truth is deeply distressing. Particularly in cases where there is a strong possibility that harm has come to the missing person, family members have reason to be worried about what they might discover if the person is found.

*“I sometimes wonder if the don’t knowing is better than the knowing, if you know what I mean. I think I’m a bit frightened in case they do find out what’s happened and it’s really terrible. And I feel maybe this is the way we’re meant to cope, not knowing.”*

(Mother of a missing man)

Even when families have a strong feeling that the missing person has died, if the missing person’s body has not been recovered it is still not necessarily possible for the family to follow accepted rituals of death, such as holding a memorial ceremony.

*“I suppose in a way that would be a final thing, if we did some sort of ceremony for her then it would be like the end, but not the end, you know. It would be the end that we think, right, we all think she’s dead now, but at the same time it’s not the end, because we still don’t know whether she is or not. So we don’t see the point in having some sort of, er, funeral ceremony or any sort of ceremony when we don’t know. I mean if we go through all sort, organising all that, and grieving for that, and then she suddenly turns up, we’d be like, oh my god. And if we do it, also, it’d be like*

*tempting fate, you know, sort of thing, you know. It’s the end but not the end, you know, it’s still not gonna, it’s still not gonna solve anything in our hearts or in our heads, you know, it’s still gonna be the same. She’s still not gonna be there. So there just doesn’t seem no point in going that, in taking that step, you know.”*

(Daughter of a missing woman)

## Coping with the loss

The ambiguity of a family member going missing not only prolongs the pain of the loss, but also disrupts the family’s usual approach to coping with pain or loss. The ongoing nature of a long term missing incident means that families are not able to follow socially prescribed grieving processes, and are not treated in the same way as families who have lost a family member through death.

**“You’ve just gotta get on with it”**

Coping with a family member being missing is extremely challenging. Families living ‘in limbo’ find it hard to use the same coping strategies they would ordinarily rely on in a painful situation. Interviewees described a range of ways they had tried to cope with their feelings, and to come to terms with the situation. Ways of coping included concentrating on practical issues, compartmentalising feelings and blocking out the pain at certain times, rationalising the disappearance, and seeking emotional support.

*“Because you know, [he’s] lived his own life and been so far away we’ve been able in a sense to carry on everyday life.”*

(Sister-in-law of a missing man)

*“I feel that probably everything possible at this stage has been done. So it is... I think that’s probably helped me now to, erm, I haven’t overcome it, but it’s helped me to come to terms with I feel that I’ve done everything that I can and everything I could’ve done. I think that does help definitely.”*

(Sister of a missing woman)

*“They’ve still got photographs of her everywhere, and that’s the best thing. You can’t put it away, you can’t hide it. If you’ve got photographs and that person’s gone, it doesn’t mean that you’re gonna forget that person. So I suggested that they were left because she’s still there.”*

(Sister of a missing woman)

*“And I think ‘what do I do? Do I sit and cry myself to sleep all day and every day?’ But you don’t because you’ve just gotta get on with it.”*  
(Sister of a missing man)

*“...you have to put it aside a bit and keep it over there and take it out and look at it only at certain times otherwise you would be an absolute wreck.”*  
(Daughter of a missing man)

*“I’m such a strong believer of self preservation and, because I’ve only had me to rely on and, erm, you know, I don’t have that family network to sort of collapse at the end of the day and say ‘oh it’s too much to carry by myself’, I always do what I can then I put it away for however long, so I might work on it in earnest for a year, then leave it for a year.”*  
(Daughter of a missing woman)

*“So, my emotions are mixed, you know. I slightly sometimes feel that I’m role playing because as time goes on you become more pragmatic. You can’t keep on grieving as if it’s as fresh on an everyday basis, to an extent I’ve had to compartmentalise it, and on days where something reminds me particularly of him, or there’s something that needs to be done that concerns him, I think about him a great deal, and there are other days where I perhaps don’t even really think about him much at all.”*  
(Sister of a missing man)

**“I do feel every now and again I could do with somebody to talk to”**

More formal sources of support may be available, an example of which is counselling. While there is no dedicated counselling service for the families of missing people in the UK, generic counselling services are available through the National Health Service. However, not all families of missing people wish to access counselling, and some prefer not to access generic services which may not fully appreciate their unique circumstances.

*“I personally don’t want one-to-one counselling. But if we could’ve had family counselling six months ago... And I did phone up the doctor and they said ‘oh it depends on what it’s about’ and I know through somebody else who tried to get counselling through the NHS [...] you’re lucky if you see someone once a month.”*  
(Mother of a missing man)

*“I feel that the counsellors [...] know far less than I do about this problem.”*  
(Father of a missing man)

*“I’d have said they were helpful. Maybe I was lucky but the counsellors I had were very good and perceptive [...] they knew exactly where I was coming from and exactly what I was talking about. It’s quite hard unless you’ve got the experience of that kind of thing to know quite what to say or suggest.”*  
(Sister of a missing woman)

*“I went for counselling, maybe about... I think it was two or two and a half years after [he] went missing, but based on my sister had died as well erm... [...] It was very helpful to be able to talk, aye. To talk to somebody who didn’t really know you. So you could say whatever you wanted. I do feel every now and again I could do with somebody to talk to again.”*  
(Mother of a missing man)

**“Take this pill, you’ll feel better?”**

An alternative to counselling, and one available through family doctors, is medication either for help with sleeping or with symptoms of depression. Like counselling, the prospect of taking medication is one that creates division, with some people choosing to pursue a medical route while others prefer to avoid it.

*“I mean I ended up on anti-depressants and all sorts. I couldn’t sleep at nights so I was on sleeping tablets, and anti-depressants.”*  
(Daughter of a missing woman)

*“I know I’m chronically depressed. And... I... don’t want to go on anti-depressants. I just think, you know, it’s a short fix and I’m not slating anyone who does it but for me... I just think it’s not gonna go away...”*  
(Mother of a missing man)

*“[His sister] I think finds it very very hard. She’s actually been on anti-depressants for about the past three years now.”*  
(Mother of a missing man)

*“...if I went and told my GP, well what would the GP say? ‘Oh, well, there there, take this pill, you’ll feel better?’ [...] that’s not me.”*  
(Mother of a missing woman)

**“I’m really thankful for my faith”**

An informal, community based source of support that is helpful to some families of missing people is religious faith. Having religious faith helps some family members to cope better with the uncertainty about the missing person’s circumstances. However, the loss of faith because of a missing incident was also described, and in the case of one family two married partners had experienced opposite reactions to their faith.

*“I’m really thankful for my faith and my relationship with God, and I think without that I would probably been in a very different emotional place but, throughout the entire time, I have had an incredible peace and I can’t really explain that. [...] My Dad had a faith and whether he’s alive or he is dead, he’s safe in God.”*

(Daughter of a missing man)

*“I pray more now than I ever did in my life. [...] But I think it can go in the opposite way. [My husband’s] no great believer anyway but, anything that happens and this especially he says [...] ‘surely if there’s a god he wouldn’t let this happen.’”*

(Mother of a missing man)

**“You want that one person to be right”**

Psychics are another example of an informal source of comfort and information to which families of missing people sometimes turn. The choice to pay to visit a medium, psychic or clairvoyant does not rely on prior belief, although this may be the case, but can also be considered as a last resort once other avenues of searching have been tried. Reports of visiting psychics were conflicting, and no interviewees reported significant findings or comfort from the experience. However, the importance to families to try every possible method of searching means that, even for non-believers, consulting a psychic can seem like a necessary step.

*“I’ve travelled the world really just to see a medium. I mean these are the stupid things you do. You go all the way to Hawaii to see a medium to see if he can pick your brother up.”*

(Brother of a missing man)

*“It’s just so frustrating. You’ve got one saying she’s dead, one saying that she’s in a house but very ill, and another one saying, oh she’s not here, she’s out and about somewhere. So even that doesn’t help [...] But it doesn’t stop you, still, from going to these people and*

*listening to what these people have got to say, you know, you still want to listen to them. Because you’re still, you want that one person to be right, to turn round and say “oh yes, she’s fine, she’s at such and such” so you can just go there and locate her, or “no, I’m sorry, she’s here with me in spirit, but her body’s in such and such a place”, you know. You know it’s not going to happen, but that’s what you’re hoping for.”*

(Daughter of a missing woman)

*“...when they came back and even [his brother] was saying “yeah, they told me stuff nobody else could know”. I mean I was a believer. And then [their] Mum had a go, and they told her different. And then she went on the radio and they told her different. And then I got to the point, it’s not going to work. It’s not happening.”*

(Sister-in-law of a missing man)

**“It is a big burden to share”**

Part of the value of accessing support services in the community, rather than within friends and family, is that there is less need to consider the impact of the burden on the support provider. When relying on friends and family for emotional support this is an important concern. The worry about the burden on friends of confiding in them is also linked to concern about eliciting negative reactions from other people, particularly by sharing unpleasant thoughts or fears. It is also difficult to consider confiding in friends and family when they themselves may be struggling to cope with the missing person’s disappearance.

*“... it is a big burden to share... I think everyone has many layers to them. And that’s where I’m also mindful of who I share this story with because some people, either it’s just too overwhelming and it’s hard work and they think ‘oh god, I don’t wanna know and she’s telling me all these dramas’.”*

(Daughter of a missing woman)

*“...if I’m really down that’s when I need to go to someone ‘jeez, I don’t know how to keep going...’ You know, but wouldn’t dare phone them in case I ring them and they’re actually having a good night.”*

(Mother of a missing man)

**“Thank heavens I’ve got her”**

Despite the concern about placing a burden on confidants, friends and family provide a great deal of support to family members of missing people. Even

when other support services have been rejected, family members find informal support from friends or family to be enormously comforting.

*“No, the only people that I really discuss it with is [my friend]. [She’s] the only one that I can discuss how I really feel.”*

(Mother of a missing woman)

*“I’m quite lucky because I’ve got a big family myself, so I had the support of my husband and my children, so I’m quite happy. [...] I’ve got lots of brothers and sisters, so we all ring each other, you know, like, when you’re in the same boat.”*

(Daughter of a missing woman)

*“If it hadn’t been for my girls, you know, (and) my grandsons, basically I think I would’ve gave up. I think I just couldn’t have coped at all. [...] I’ve got a really good friend. We’ve been friends since I was 17. Who’s absolutely brilliant. I can go to her at any time.”*

(Mother of a missing man)

*“I think the way I, sort of, survived really was through the most incredible support from my friends and family. [...] I think that’s what kept me going. My family, my friends, obviously my daughter.”*

(Mother of a missing man)

Importantly, regardless of who family members choose to confide in, the process of talking about the missing person can be an extremely helpful and comforting one.

*“I think it helps more at this time [the anniversary] to talk about it, actually, than it does to sit and dwell on it. If you’re talking about it then you can laugh and talk about the things she was like.”*

(Daughter of a missing woman)

## Discussion

For the families who took part in this study the overwhelming emotional experience was of sadness about the loss. This manifests itself in a range of emotional and physical symptoms and behaviours, and is made uniquely painful because it is unresolved and indefinite. Other emotions described by family members include anger, guilt, hope and relief. Family members described how it is difficult to experience more negative emotions, partly because they are less socially acceptable, and partly because of the need to protect and respect the missing person’s reputation

and memory. An important way in which families attempt to alleviate the pain and feelings of helplessness associated with their ambiguous loss is by ensuring that the fourth cause of guilt (guilt for not doing more to find the missing person) is relieved by becoming active in searching or engaging the services of relevant search agencies. This is further discussed in Chapter 5.

The pain of having a family member missing does not necessarily diminish over time. Some level of acceptance was described, but the lack of certainty means that there cannot be a recovery process in the same way that families eventually learn to accept and cope with loss through death. Being ‘in limbo’, without certainty of life or death, makes loss through someone going missing particularly difficult to bear and less likely to become easier to cope with. The concept of ambiguous loss, as developed by Boss, provides a general theory for explaining the particular challenges facing families of missing people. This study has built upon the ambiguous loss framework to explain and develop more specific hypotheses about the experiences of the families of long term missing people.

Families’ emotional experiences seem to be affected by their perceptions of the disappearance, their belief about whether the missing person left deliberately, and about whether or not they are still alive. Families described how rationalising the disappearance affected their emotional experiences, and how important the need for explanations was for their approach to coping with the loss. This was exemplified by the strong theories families developed about why the missing person left, whether they wanted to leave, and what had happened to them since.

Families who presumed their missing family member had gone missing unintentionally seemed to find it easier to rationalise the disappearance, particularly when they suspected foul play or mental ill health had played a part. However, this rationalisation can lead to tension between the need to believe the missing person would never have left intentionally, and the hope that they are still alive and may one day return. This tension is essentially irreconcilable as long as the person remains missing.

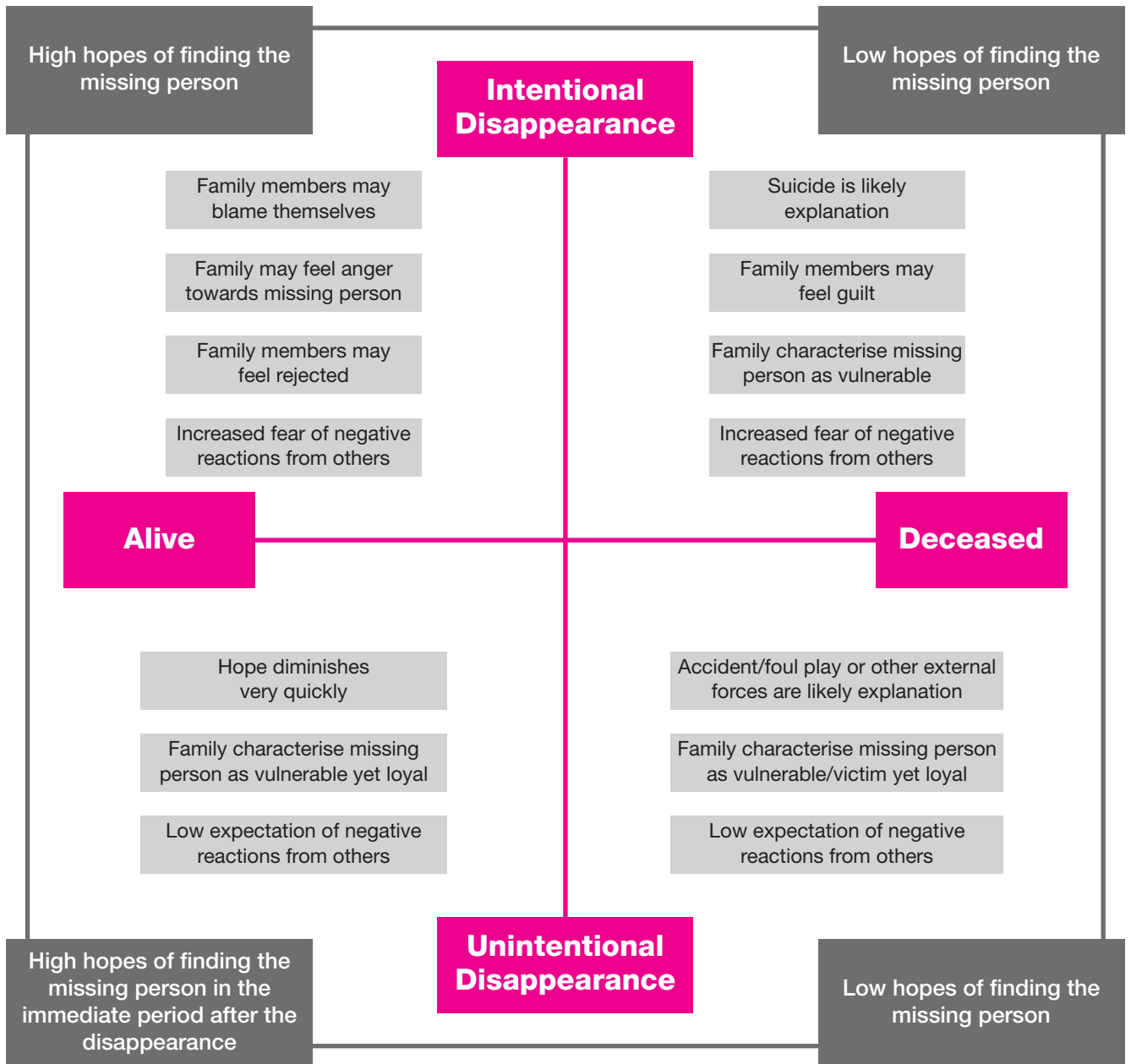
Families who believe their missing member went missing deliberately have more cause to hope that they are still alive and may one day return, but this is tempered by feelings of rejection and guilt that they may be partly to blame. In order to protect themselves emotionally, and to safeguard the missing person’s memory, they may construct an explanation that seems to alleviate blame on the family and the missing person. This can lead to tension between the belief



that the person left deliberately (because that is likely and holds more hope for finding them) and the need to explain the disappearance so that the memory of their relationship with the missing person is protected.

relationships between families' perceptions of whether or not the disappearance was intentional, whether or not the missing person is alive, and their hopes and emotions connected to the disappearance. Families may fit into one of the quadrants, or move between the quadrants over time.

Figure 1 demonstrates the emerging pattern of the



**Figure 1: The effect of families' perceptions of the disappearance on their emotional reaction to the experience**

Further research with families of missing people will shed further light on the importance of the apparent relationship between the families' perceptions of the

disappearance and their rationalisation of their feelings and expectations of reactions from others.

## 4. Financial, legal and other practical impacts

For some families of missing people the disappearance has further effects over and above the emotional trauma. Financial impacts are caused by a range of factors, including the costs associated with searching for the missing person, the loss of the missing person's income, and the costs incurred by family members in the process of sorting out the missing person's affairs.

### The cost of the search

**“We just sort of clubbed together”**

Undertaking private search activities, as well as the disruption caused to family life during the period of searching, can create a financial burden on the families of missing people. Search activities may be relatively inexpensive, but for others the costs can become high. These costs may include the cost of producing posters and leaflets, the price of paying for advertising space, and even the cost of long distance travel to investigate all possibilities.

*“Even online there's searches that you have to pay for, so you can't always go on them. 'Cause you know they're there, and you sort of say 'well, next month when I get paid, if I've got that bit left over, I'll pay and go on that one'.”*

(Mother of a missing woman)

*“...there was a possibility we could put it on the back of the local buses. They looked into that. And it was quite expensive and we would have had to pay for that ourselves.”*

(Daughter of a missing woman)

*“And obviously that's had quite a financial impact on us because we couldn't afford to go out to [another country] [...] it'd probably cost us about a thousand pounds in all which we could ill afford in November, Christmas time really. But I just felt that I'd got to go to see if I could find out.”*

(Sister of a missing man)

**“Financially we're just completely screwed”**

As well as the costs directly incurred by the search activities, the disruption to family life can also result in additional costs. The financial impact of taking time off work may be severe, and interviewees even described losing jobs, being forced to leave jobs, and being unable to find another job when the time came. This interruption to their working life was attributed

both to the need for extra time to devote to the search, and to the emotional stress they experienced. An example of this was one interviewee who felt that her job search had been unsuccessful because of her diminished self-esteem following the disappearance of her loved one.

*“I told people straight away because obviously it would affect my work. So my boss was the first person to know, before my mother did because I had to get to my boss the following day and say 'look, my brother's gone missing. I'm just gonna go and tell my mum about it. I'm not gonna be in for a day or two'. So my boss knew about it straight away.”*

(Sister of a missing man)

*“...there have been so many things, and now financially we're just completely screwed, I mean I have got to, erm, move out [...] You know I can't keep the payments up and so I'm gonna have to rent my house out [...] I don't know how to stop the dominoes falling.”*

(Mother of a missing man)

*“I didn't question it before, I was 'oh, yeah, I'd like to do that job, I'd be brilliant at that, I could do this'. Now, it's 'would I be able to do that?', and I'm sure it is as a spin off effect from this whole situation. Just you self doubt yourself so much, constantly. It's a battle.”*

(Mother of a missing woman)

One interviewee even described paying to maintain a postal redirection on her previous address for many years, in case her mother ever tried to get in touch by letter.

*“...the next year after she went missing, well, I was still there when I reported it to the police, at my last address, so it must have been about eighteen months after, I, erm, got my mail redirected, for about five years. And then renewed it again. I thought 'she's gonna write one day, but she wouldn't know where to write to', so that's why I had it redirected to this house.”*

(Daughter of a missing woman)

### Losing the missing person's income

Not only are costs involved in searching for a missing person, but in many cases the family left behind must cope with the loss of their family member's income. Although income may not be lost immediately, the

uncertainty around the processes by which official agencies deal with missing person cases can lead to a great deal of stress and confusion. The impact of losing the income may also be severe, and in the most extreme cases families' home and security may be at risk.

### “You just feel a bit vulnerable”

The vulnerability of families of missing people can be felt keenly as families struggle to reorganise financial arrangements. Dealing with official agencies that have no standing procedures for dealing with such cases can be frustrating and frightening. Unlike the loss of a family member through death, the loss of a family member who remains missing does not automatically entitle the family left behind to insurance payments, next of kin inheritance or access or control of the missing person's estate.

*“I thought ‘my goodness, if all those pensions stop, erm, these are being paid out. Financially, I need to make other arrangements and...’ So it was those kind of practical things that nobody seemed to know. [...] Likewise, I’ve just got this horror that they’ll contact me and go ‘oh, we’re terribly sorry. It should’ve stopped. Can you pay it all back?’ It’s that sort of thing. I really don’t want that to happen. You just feel a bit vulnerable.”*

(Daughter of a missing man)

*“...having to deal with things like, erm, insurance companies for [his] motorbike, erm, and they’d be ‘sorry, we need it in writing.’ ‘Well I’d love you to have it in writing. But my son is missing.’ ‘Well sorry, unless [he] writes to us...’ ‘Are you fucking stupid?!’ You know, it would end up with me just completely losing it. His bank was going overdrawn, and I know it sounds so petty in the great scheme of what’s happened, but I didn’t want my son’s account to go overdrawn. It mattered so much to me.”*

(Mother of a missing man)

The most serious case of financial impacts following a disappearance concerned the family of a missing man who left behind a partner and four children. The missing man's brother was interviewed as part of this research.

*“... they used to live on dole, but then [he] would get a job for three months and then he’d fall out of work ... So they never had a lot of money. [...] And as soon as he went missing the rent won’t get paid, ‘cause they won’t give [his partner] the money ‘cause it’s*

*[his] dole money. So, dealing with all that devastation of him missing, she had to keep going down the dole, down the social and trying to get some money sorted, you know, ‘cause [he] weren’t signing.*

*“So she had all that rigmarole. By the time it came through she owed so much rent on the place by the time it come through they said ‘look’, I mean this is the sympathy of councils, ‘if you don’t pay that rent back’, she said ‘I can’t, you haven’t given me the...’ So they said ‘well you’re going to have to be evicted’.*

*“So they evicted her from that house, her and the four kids, and put them in, the social put them in two houses. There was her and [her daughter], the younger one, and next door there was the elder three boys. That’s how stupid it is. [...] So she’s dealing with a missing husband, and no money, and all of a sudden they’re evicted out their house and put in these other two right dumps.”*

(Brother of a missing man)

## Dealing with the missing person's affairs

### “I can’t keep doing this”

As well as the financial costs of searching, and the effect of losing the missing person's income, families may find themselves burdened with the costs of sorting out the missing person's affairs. In some cases this means paying for storage of belongings, or rent or mortgage payments on the missing person's home until alternative arrangements can be made. In other cases families decide to keep up payments on the missing person's bills, or deposit money into a bank account, to make sure that the missing person's affairs are kept in order in case they return.

*“...insurance came up earlier in the year and he was like, well what do I do about that, kind of thing? Erm, because my Dad used to work in insurance, so he rang and spoke to someone he knows [...] I think he worried like if [Mum] was still using [the car] and had an accident”.*

(Daughter of a missing woman)

*“I got it all packed up and [...] put into storage for want of not, kind of, knowing what else to do with it. But, after a couple of months of forty quid a week storage I thought ‘well, I can’t keep doing this either’, so I had another sort out and at that point gave away the large pieces of furniture to, erm, the YMCA. [...] So I*

*got rid of all of the big items and then brought the rest round here, and have it all stored in the garage.”*

(Sister of a missing man)

This practicality may also have impacts that extend beyond the financial cost. The time-consuming nature of dealing with official agencies can affect not only a family member's work life, but can also be stressful and upsetting.

*“You know it all kind of takes energy. Every time you have to make that phone call to explain the situation it kind of brings it all up again, so I [...] took a day off work and just blasted all those phone calls and made as many enquiries as I could and then I was a bit spent after that.”*

(Daughter of a missing man)

### “What happens after seven years?”

Unlike dealing with a death, where a wealth of advice is available for relatives, dealing with someone going missing can be extremely confusing. While agencies that deal with the families of missing people can provide some advice, each situation is different and is likely to require more tailored advice. For families who cannot secure the services of a specialist advisor the process can be daunting.

A particular area of confusion is that around the length of time for which a person must remain missing before their belongings pass to their next of kin. Several interviewees mentioned that they had heard of a 'seven year rule', but had not had this confirmed by any official advisers. In the UK (and internationally) there is a variety of current and pending legislation that deals with this issue, but there is currently no one piece of legislation in England and Wales which provides for the families of missing people. This lack of clarity means that families are forced either to seek (and pay for) expert legal advice, or to remain in a state of uncertainty and possibly continue to deal with the financial and legal impacts of the disappearance alone and on an ad hoc basis.

*“You can't do anything because everything has to stay open for seven years.”*

(Daughter of a missing woman)

*“The number of people kept mentioning something about a seven year rule, erm, but nobody quite knew where that originated. They just kept saying ‘well I've heard of a seven year thing and, well, after seven years...’ Well what happens after seven years? Who decides that? And is there something I need to*

*do? And they're still questions that still I've not actually found the answers to.”*

(Daughter of a missing man)

*“When a person's missing for so many years [...] the court rules that this particular person is missing for so long they are presumed dead.”*

(Sister of a missing woman)

*“Nobody's ever told me. I thought it was eight years, but nobody's ever told us. Nobody. There are things that people should know, you know.”*

(Brother of a missing man)

## Discussion

Families of missing people face a range of financial, legal and practical issues. Some of these may be unavoidable, but they can also have a significant impact on the families' emotional experience, and can also have an effect on areas of their lives that are unrelated to the missing person or their disappearance.

In the first instance the need to ensure that every possible effort has been made to find the missing person can lead to a family's decision to undertake their own search activities. Particularly in the early days after a disappearance, before all the relevant support services have been accessed, families may choose to distribute their own posters, leaflets and photographs, they may travel to areas they believe the missing person may be, and may consider paying for other support or services that they believe will help find the missing person.

As well as the costs incurred by searching, there may be financial impacts associated with the loss of the missing person's income, and the costs of sorting out their belongings and other affairs. Sorting out complex legal and ownership issues can cause a number of impacts on families of missing people. Confusion or lack of knowledge about processes can cause stress and worry, and this may not be alleviated by contact with official agencies or individuals as the practical information and instructions received was described by interviewees as unclear, inconsistent and in some cases entirely absent.

The delays in finding solutions to practical, legal and financial problems are also problematic. The time between the disappearance and problems being solved can be lengthy, and for some families this can have devastating effects. This is more likely to be problematic when the missing person had a great deal of financial responsibility, was supporting dependants,



or when financial difficulties and responsibilities are transferred to a family member.

The lack of clarity among official agencies about the legal position when someone goes missing is a particular problem, which can have knock-on effects on families' emotional wellbeing and wider lifestyle. In particular the length of time it takes for families to negotiate the legal situation of dealing with the missing person's income and responsibilities can lead to increased emotional suffering. It is important also to note that the emotional impact of the disappearance may also have an effect on the remaining family members' ability to cope with the associated financial and practical pressures, possibly leading to even greater support needs in dealing with the missing person's affairs.

## 5. Experiences with service providers and the media

For those families who access agencies for support with searching for the missing person, including print and broadcast media outlets, the experience of dealing with these organisations can have an important impact on their overall experience, even when the person remains missing.

### The importance of taking action

*“Doing something is better than doing nothing”*

Interviewees described the importance of searching, both as a practical necessity in trying to locate the missing person, and for the emotional reassurance provided by activity and effort. Active searching provides not only a distraction from dwelling on imagined scenarios of what happened, but also helps families to feel that they are fulfilling their duty of care to their loved one by pursuing every possible avenue of enquiry.

*“...it helps me by thinking that I’m still actively involved and still trying to locate and look and always just constantly looking at people. [...] it makes me feel like I’m doing something, rather than sitting here every day doing nothing and wondering, know what I mean? At least if I’m on the web pages and stuff and checking out hospitals and stuff, I feel as if I’m doing something, you know, rather than doing nothing.”*

(Daughter of a missing woman)

*“...it helps you because you put the effort in. You try, you know, and then you feel better about yourself ’cause at least you’ve tried to find that person.”*

(Brother of a missing man)

*“I think that for me, I felt like I was doing something. I think that’s what kept me going.”*

(Mother of a missing man)

### Deciding to contact the police

Contacting the police is a key step for a family in terms of defining their family member as a missing person. Regardless of varying expectations about what could be done, the decision about whether to call the police was a big step for interviewees. Subsequent thoughts about the actions of the police were dependent, in part, on previous expectations about what the police could do.

*“Admitting that it’s a reality”*

Making the first report to the police was an important step for the interviewees. In some cases, particularly where the missing person is vulnerable for some reason, the police were contacted very early in order to mount an immediate and extensive search. In cases where the missing person was perceived to be less vulnerable, or had apparently left intentionally, the decision to contact the police was more difficult.

Defining a person as missing is highly dependent on the people they have left behind. Malcolm Payne defined going missing as a situation whereby a person is unusually absent from their normal life, “leading to a situation in which members of the network feel obliged to search for the missing person and may institute official procedures to identify the person as missing” (Payne, 1995: 335). For interviewees in this research contacting the police was the culmination of the process of recognising that their family member had gone missing, and marked the point at which the situation became officially recognised.

*“Perhaps it’s just admitting, if you go to the police, admitting that it’s a reality.”*

(Mother of a missing woman)

*“Then you think should I contact the police? But then somehow, you’re so confused, and half of you thinks she’s not actually missing. What can I say? What can I tell the police because we haven’t had a big row and she’s stormed out so you kind of feel [...] you can’t go to the police. She’s a grown adult and you really didn’t know what to do to be really honest. And you think, am I being over the top by saying she’s missing when she’s a grown woman?”*

(Mother of a missing woman)

The decision to call the police is also affected by the family’s expectations of what the police could do to help. Interviewees described, for example, the belief that searching for an adult who has gone missing on purpose, or who is not particularly vulnerable, is not a high priority for the police.

*“I think basically the way you think about the police is not the real side of them you know. You’re seeing it as a TV programme and think, well, that’s the way they work. And it’s not like that.”*

(Mother of a missing man)

*"I didn't expect anything, you know. And in a lot of ways, if you go into things and don't expect too much then, you know, you're better off. Go in there and expect too much, you'll be bitterly disappointed. So... I went with an open mind, wasn't quite sure. And whatever happened, happened."*

(Daughter of a missing woman)

*"As the family you want something done about it, you want everybody to run around for you, and I suppose they're busy, but as far as you're concerned you've got somebody missing and you want something done."*

(Brother of a missing man)

*too concerned about, you know, he's just a normal bloke that can probably quite easily look after himself. Why should the police be concerned, you know. I find that bit quite difficult."*

(Sister of a missing man)

*"...the most helpful thing of all was the police being prepared to move into action [...] I was really surprised, pleasantly surprised by how much interest the police were prepared to show in it, because it wasn't a vulnerable person in the traditional sense, of being a child or an elderly Alzheimer's type person wandering off from a care home."*

(Sister of a missing man)

## Experiences with the police

***"I don't know how serious they were taking it"***

It is extremely important for the families of missing people that the police are seen to be taking the case seriously. The family is bound by their duty to do everything they can to find the missing person, but interviewees described doubting that the police were taking their case as seriously. While some interviewees reported feeling that they were taken very seriously indeed, others had concerns that their case was not given due consideration. For family members, feeling that they were taken seriously may be linked to their initial expectations of what the police could do or would do, as well as to the manner of the individual officers with whom they have contact.

*"I don't know how serious [the police] were taking it. I think there was far too much speculation. [...] And I felt nobody listened to me. I just don't feel people listened."*

(Mother of a missing man)

*"I'd say it was a full month before the police took us really seriously and come down and took a statement from [my husband], and by then we'd done it all."*

(Sister-in-law of a missing man)

*"It was one of these interviews where he just didn't want to know, really. [...] 'Cause they've got too much on their plate, other things. And you feel nobody cares."*

(Brother of a missing man)

*"They're not interested in a [40's] year old bloke that's gone missing. [...] I almost feel that [he's] in that middle bit where he's not a child that they can be too concerned about and he's not an elderly person that they can be*

***"The police branded him a loner"***

At the initial stages of an investigation, interviewees described feeling that the police formed an impression of the missing person's character and subsequently based the investigation on stereotypes and assumptions. Some interviewees feared that the assumptions made by the police had been incorrect and negative, and feared that this might have affected the quality of the investigation. As well as seeking to maintain the missing person's reputation amongst acquaintances, and when dealing with the media (as discussed later), families sought to ensure that the police did not develop a wholly negative impression of the missing person. This is particularly related to the finding that it is important to families that every possible effort should be made to find the missing person.

*"...that's the impression [the police] gave me, as if they think 'oh, well, she's just upped and left him, that's it, end of story'."*

(Daughter of a missing woman)

*"... they've got [him] pictured as an alcoholic who lives on the streets and they didn't know the real [him]. I mean he might have spent the odd night somewhere in a hostel but, I mean, you know he's not like that, and we think the police have just put him down as 'he's only an alcoholic, he'll turn up'. [...] I think we was assuming the worst, that everyone was just going to get the same impression that 'oh, he's an alcoholic on the street' and just write him off. We thought, you know, what if people don't look for him?"*

(Sister-in-law of a missing man)

*"Anyway, so we went into this room, and the first thing [the police officer] said 'he might have run off with a married woman, with a*

woman'. I said 'well he hasn't, 'cause if he'd run off with a woman he'd have phoned me up and said 'tell the kids I'll be in touch'."

(Brother of a missing man)

"Well the police branded him a loner as well didn't they? In the papers in the [local news] saying that he's a loner, more or less, branded him as kind of an oddball."

(Sister-in-law of a missing man)

### **“I cannot praise him enough”**

Families described how their relationship with individual police officers working on their case influenced their overall experience of dealing with the police.

"The family officer, I mean he's been brilliant we're still in touch with him. He's been absolutely fantastic. [...] Great support from him. I cannot praise him enough. [...] I've felt between my family officer and [the charity Missing People], I've really had what I'm looking for basically."

(Mother of a missing man)

"I think they really were outstanding. You know, they've got a very local team. And it was really helpful to just have, erm, a couple of people who were contact points. There was the inspector and then she put a sergeant, erm, became allocated to the case. So it was quite good to just have two, and there was kind of an evening sergeant as well, erm, it was just good to have those. Just a couple of points of contact, erm, rather than, you know, it could so easily have been a different person every time. That was really helpful."

(Daughter of a missing man)

"I got, er, [my named officer] on my phone, and the amount of times I've phoned her. I mean, I've probably spoken to her twice in the three years, but I must have phoned her thirty."

(Daughter of a missing woman)

### **“We're just getting a ringing phone”**

For all interviewees, being kept informed of progress was extremely welcome, and when that contact was missing it was a source of frustration and anxiety. For the families, who seek to ensure that every possible effort has been made to find the missing person, not knowing whether or not checks are being made can be extremely upsetting. Feeling unaware of progress of the police investigation exacerbated interviewees'

feelings of uncertainty, guilt, and of being 'in limbo'. For those who were kept well informed this was strongly linked to a sense of satisfaction that everything possible was being done and that the service they had received was adequate.

"Even if there's no news, just to ring maybe once a week, once a fortnight at least, just to say, you know, 'we're still here, we're still looking into it'. But we've got to the point now where we can't even ring them. They don't speak, they don't visit, and we're just left in limbo. Well are they still looking for him? He's still a missing person, we're still looking for him, but are the police doing anything?"

(Sister-in-law of a missing man)

"I'd like to know if [the police are] still checking hospitals [...] And I just wonder whether [they] still doing that or if [they are] still checking medical records or the bank."

(Daughter of a missing woman)

"We've not heard from the police for months now. We keep ringing, 'oh yeah, we'll get someone to return your call', or we're ringing and we're just getting a ringing phone."

(Sister-in-law of a missing man)

## **Confusion about coordination of services**

### **“There seemed to be some process going on”**

Unlike the wealth of services provided to offer support with other traumatic life events, there is little specific advice and support available to families of missing people, and families struggle to understand what is available and how best to access appropriate services. When services are provided, families do not always understand the processes by which decisions are made, services are designed and implemented, and information is shared between service providers.

"I didn't know what way it worked or anything like that."

(Mother of a missing man)

"I had a really good understanding of what was happening locally, but it's kind of knowing that, detail of... Okay so the police have now contacted these people. Their job is to do this? And it's cascaded out to whomever... Just even things like the hospitals. I sort of think you know 'is it the local hospitals that have been contacted or does that go nationally, because everything's divided into trusts so do they talk to each other? [...] what

*if somebody unidentified came into a hospital, what are hospital's processes on, erm, identifying that person? Do they contact the police? What is there...?"*

(Daughter of a missing man)

*always communicating with me. They've always done it and I've been kept informed about any new moves, about interviews with newspapers and all that. And programmes that various TV stations/ people might want to set up, I've been kept informed."*

(Father of a missing man)

## Missing People

All interviewees selected for this research were in contact with Missing People. They had contacted the charity in a variety of ways, and had been in contact for different lengths of time. Although this study did not aim to evaluate the services provided by the charity (for reasons discussed in Holmes, 2008) interviewees did mention their case management and involvement with the charity.

***“That phone call just lifts me right up”***

Interviewees emphasised the importance of being in regular contact with their Missing People case workers, and being kept up to date with any developments on their case. This contact was described not only in practical terms, but also as an important source of comfort and support. As one interviewee described it, “it does give you a boost”.

*“So that's really good, [my Missing People case manager's] been really good. He periodically phones out of the blue and we have a chat and he's really sweet.”*

(Sister of a missing man)

*“They do ring up every so often, just to see if we've heard anything. But, I think that's good to have that contact.”*

(Mother of a missing woman)

*“...every time they've [Missing People] phoned, even if it's just for a couple of minutes, that phone call just lifts me right up. It really did, because it's nice to know that somebody else is thinking about [him]. [...] And that wee phone call, even if as I say it's for two minutes, it just makes you feel so good. And really I can't thank them enough. And sometimes it is just the wee unexpected one that does it.”*

(Mother of a missing man)

*“What I particularly liked about it was the kind of spontaneous reaction to the problem. This is the Missing People. You don't have to ask them to do anything particularly, they're on to it all through it's been like that. They've always communicated with me and it's been, erm... I felt sometimes that I was really in touch with them quite enough, you know, but they're*

In order to maintain separation between this research study and the wider work of the charity, participants were not asked to comment in detail about their experience of receiving services from Missing People. The potential for biasing responses to other aspects of investigation, and for eliciting incomplete or exaggerated answers, informed the decision not to probe for opinions about the quality of service provided by the charity.

However, in spontaneous comments, interviewees described potential or previous problems with their case management that can have an impact on families' wellbeing. Although this evaluative work requires a different method of investigation, and this study provides an incomplete explanation, risks to family members are associated with: poor or inconsistent contact with case workers; lack of clarity around search methods and information transfer between organisations; inappropriate or insufficient publicity provision; and the gaps in current service and advice provision (both from the charity and from other organisations).

## Media campaigns and appeals

***“We don't want it to be completely forgotten”***

Families of missing people often seek to use media outlets to publicise their family member's disappearance. As part of the package of services available to the families of missing people, Missing People can produce and circulate posters of a missing person and carry out publicity through web appeals, media slots and features. In addition to telephone support, interviewees acknowledged the role of Missing People case workers in facilitating contact with the media and generating publicity for their case.

*“...they're the ones that phone me up and say “there's a TV programme going out, they're looking for people, are you interested? Can we pass your number on?” Yeah, yeah, terrific. They've done it with three or four magazines as well, radio stations, you know. [...] Everything really that's any sort of publicity or any sort of thing that involves my Mum has come from Missing People.”*

(Daughter of a missing woman)



*"...they're always trying to help, to do something to put him in the public eye. I mean, through the 5 years, it's always been 'oh, we were thinking we were going to try maybe getting a wee bit in [a newspaper] or, in such magazine.' And it's these wee things, and it's because I don't need to do it myself."*

(Mother of a missing man)

For the families of missing people involvement in media appeals can be important not just as a practical measure to assist their search, but also emotionally; helping them to fulfill their duty to keep up the momentum of the search. Although the experience of seeing media appeals, and of being interviewed, can be stressful or embarrassing, interviewees described a sense of obligation to access all possible publicity.

*"...one of the local papers picked it up and it was splashed on the front page which was quite hard (as) we weren't expecting it. And, you know, a great big picture on the front page."*

(Mother of a missing man)

*"I think if we didn't do anything, if we didn't do them, then it'd just be forgot about completely, and we don't want it to be completely forgotten, you know, we want people still to be out looking and keeping their eyes open and stuff."*

(Daughter of a missing woman)

*"It's something you've gotta do. If you want to know any more information, if you wanna find out more you've gotta reach a larger audience. You've gotta test every avenue haven't you. So, radio, papers, TV, anything."*

(Brother of a missing man)

Families' experiences of working with the media can be mixed, however, and involve a degree of image management; both the family's and the missing person's public persona must be carefully constructed and managed. Just as interviewees reported concern about the risk of the police stereotyping the missing person, findings from this research show that families may be reluctant to allow certain information to become public, for fear that negative stereotyping may adversely affect the search.

*"I mean a lot of people, when it was in the paper, were thinking they've painted him as a homeless alcoholic that lived on the street."*

(Sister-in-law of a missing man)

*"I just had an inbuilt suspicion of the press using a story to sell a paper rather than necessarily the most, erm, appropriate telling*

*of the story. And the telling of the story, and this was a little bit difficult at the beginning as well, has had definite gloss on it. You know, some of [his] antisocial aspects of his behaviour and, you know, there's been sort of aggression. [...] All of that clearly all needs to be glossed over, erm, in order to keep some public sympathy."*

(Sister of a missing man)

## Discussion

Families described the need to ensure that they had pursued every possible method of trying to find their missing family member. Engaging the assistance of relevant support agencies is an important way of fulfilling this need. However, the act of making official reports to the police or other agencies can be a difficult step for the family to take. In cases where there is accepted vulnerability this is less problematic, as expectations are that a strong effort will be made to find the missing person. In cases where vulnerability is less obvious, there can be reluctance to make a report, either because of a perceived risk of stereotyping, or because of low expectations that much can or will be done.

Once services are engaged, the perceived quality of the service that is provided can have a strong impact on the families' emotional wellbeing. Key factors that appear to influence satisfaction (and thus the feeling that a sufficient effort has been made to find the missing person) include: the manner of the individual service providers; family members' expectations of how the service providers can assist them; whether the family feels they were taken seriously; the quality of long term contact and how well the family is kept informed of developments (or lack thereof). There is also generalised confusion about how service providers, particularly the police and Missing People, share information and work together to search for missing people. This confusion can lead to anxiety that not all appropriate work has been done and effort made to find the missing person.

Families also experience a degree of stress associated with dealing with outside agencies, and in particular media channels for publicity. While families feel a duty to continue to explore all avenues of searching, they also face the complication of portraying a sympathetic image of their missing family member, and possibly having to confront prejudice and challenge assumptions.

## 6. Summary and recommendations

This research has provided an initial exploration of the impact on families when someone goes missing, and has highlighted a number of areas that warrant further investigation. The findings show that the families of missing people face a range of experiences and impacts on their lives as a result of the disappearance. These experiences and impacts can be loosely grouped into three categories: emotional and social experiences; financial, legal and other practical impacts; and experiences with service providers and media organisations. These experiences are all interconnected and may occur either simultaneously or at different times. While it is impossible to predict how any family may cope with a loved one's disappearance, some trends have emerged from this analysis.

Emotional and social experiences are affected by the nature of the disappearance, whether the family believe the person went missing deliberately or unintentionally, and whether or not the family believe the missing person to be alive. For example, feelings such as guilt and anger may be tempered by the belief that the missing person went missing unintentionally, although this belief is also linked to reduced hope of finding them alive. Figure 1 on page 26 demonstrates the relationships between perceptions of the disappearance and subsequent emotional and social experiences.

Emotional experiences are diverse, and include sadness, depression, worry, guilt, anger and hope, as well as physical symptoms such as sleeplessness and ill health. Family relationships can be seriously affected by a family member going missing. Changes in relationships can be positive as well as negative, and may also alter over time. Family members' reactions to their emotional experiences can manifest in changed behaviour, including increased or decreased willingness to tell other people about the disappearance. Relatives of missing people cope with their emotional experience in different ways, including the use of medication and counselling. Overall a reliance on friends and family appears to be extremely important in supporting the families of missing people through the experience.

Financial, legal and other practical issues can influence the emotional and social impacts on a family, and may also be caused by the disruption that results from the emotional trauma. The cost of initial searching activities may fall to family members, and families may choose to pay for certain search and publicity channels which would not otherwise be available to them. Furthermore, the loss of the missing person's income, coupled with the expense of taking professional advice and sorting out their affairs, can result in a large financial burden on a family. Additionally, the emotional impact on family members of having to negotiate complex systems and

dealing with official institutions can be significant.

The services families receive from external agencies can also have an effect on the families' wellbeing. By reporting the disappearance to the police and other agencies, the families of missing people are able to satisfy their feelings of duty towards the missing person, and are reassured that they are making every possible effort to find them. However, engaging official agencies also forces families to acknowledge the reality and seriousness of the situation. The expectations they have of service providers, and the reaction and service they subsequently receive, can also have a strong effect on their emotional wellbeing. Furthermore, many families deal with a variety of media organisations in order to get publicity for their case, and can find that this places additional stress on them.

From this research it is clear that when people go missing it has a devastating effect on those who care for them, and that these effects are not all alleviated by the passage of time. It is also important for service providers and policy makers to recognise that for each person who goes missing the impacts are likely to affect a number of their friends and family.

### Recommendations

*“I really hope a lot of good comes out of this research”*

Although service improvements may not have much impact on their own lives, all of the interviewees were keen that their participation in this research should help other families in similar situations. Analysis of this research has indicated that a number of improvements should be made, both to services for families and to relevant legislation, in order to alleviate unnecessary suffering and provide more effective support while the families of missing people continue to exist 'in limbo'.

#### Improving access to support services

1. Missing People should provide an enhanced range of advice literature for families about the emotional and practical support services provided by the charity, about dealing with media attention, and about other potential sources (in the voluntary and statutory sector) of assistance.
2. Missing People should arrange for the findings from this research to be incorporated, wherever possible, into the training, awareness and

professional development programmes of other providers (in the voluntary and statutory sector) of assistance to families of missing people.

3. Missing People should work with relevant government departments and non-departmental public bodies (etc.) to maximise the opportunities for 'mainstreaming' a range of support services tailored to the specific needs and circumstances of families of missing people.
4. ACPO and the National Policing Improvement Agency (NPIA) should encourage police forces routinely to inform the family members of missing people of the range of support services available to them.
5. Consultation with families of missing people should be at the heart of service development and planning.

#### **Clarifying the legal and financial position**

6. Legal and financial advice and support should be available to the families of missing people. While this may not be bespoke, some instructions should be provided to direct families to appropriate resources.
7. The benefits (or otherwise) of introducing specific legislation governing the presumption of death in missing person cases in England and Wales should be examined. Any opportunity to provide a robust legal framework for dealing with the estate and other affairs of missing people who are presumed dead, and for improving clarity for family members, should be pursued.

#### **Recommendations for the police service**

8. Police forces should note the importance of the initial and continuing police response on the emotional impact on families, particularly with regard to families' concerns that everything possible is done to find the missing person
9. The family members of a missing person should have a clearly identified single point of contact with the police force dealing with their case.
10. Investigating officers should consider families' need to know, as far as possible, what actions have been taken to find their missing family member.

#### **Further research**

While the number of interviews conducted does not allow for any statistical analysis of significant relationships between variables, this study has provided a framework for constructing theories and testing hypotheses about how different impacts develop over time. A number of areas of future research would further improve understanding and provide robust evidence for policy development:

11. A large scale study based on the findings of this research should be undertaken to estimate the prevalence and extent of the impacts on families, and the costs to left-behind families, and society as a whole, of missing incidents. Such a study could also test the hypothesis, developed by this study, that families' perceptions of whether the disappearance was intentional, and whether the missing person is still alive, inform their coping strategies and emotional reactions to the disappearance.
12. Further research should aim to extend the theoretical framework by examining the impact on families of different types of disappearance, particularly comparing the duration, the characteristics of the missing person, the families' own perceptions of the disappearance and other relevant factors.
13. Press and media attention around cases of people going missing can have a profound impact on the families left behind, and further research should more fully investigate this issue in order to provide advice to service providers, media organisation, and families of missing people.
14. The impact of low or no interest from official agencies, and families' own expectations about services that are available, can affect not only families' emotional wellbeing, but also the extent of the search for the missing person. Further research should be conducted to explore the experiences of families who have little or no contact with the police or other support providers.
15. The main service providers (Missing People and the police service) should conduct evaluations of existing services to assess family members' satisfaction and to identify areas for service development.



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- A copy of the full research report can be downloaded at [www.missingpeople.org.uk/limbo](http://www.missingpeople.org.uk/limbo)
- If you would like to discuss the issues raised in Living in Limbo please contact:
- [policyandresearch@missingpeople.org.uk](mailto:policyandresearch@missingpeople.org.uk)  
020 8392 4591
- Missing People  
284 Upper Richmond Road West, London SW4 0QA  
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