

Who Goes Missing?

Key Points

- Studies show that around two-thirds of people who go missing are below the age of 18 (NPIA, 2011: 16)
- Children and young people between the ages of 12 and 17 are the most likely to go missing (NPIA, 2011: 16)
- Overall, roughly equal numbers of males and females go missing. However, in teenagers, there are substantially more cases of females going missing than males; whereas in adults, males go missing more often than females (NPIA, 2011: 17)
- Several circumstances have been found to be particularly prevalent amongst missing people. Many had been undergoing employment or financial problems, whilst some experience of homelessness was particularly prevalent amongst young people who went missing (Tarling and Burrows, 2004, Centrepont, 2001)

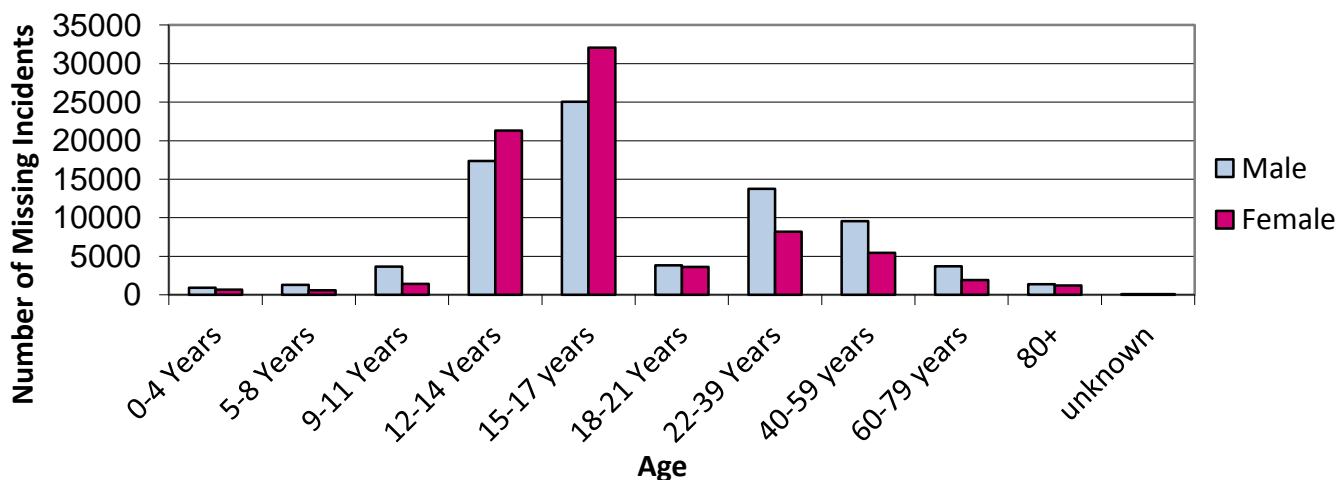
Background

An estimated 327,000 missing person reports are filed with the police every year in the United Kingdom (NPIA, 2011: 10). Several studies and reports have sought to collate and analyse data samples to explore the demographics of missing people; the National Police Improvement Agency (NPIA) have produced the most comprehensive study to date which attempts to accurately profile the characteristics of people who go missing (NPIA, 2011).

Age and Gender

The following graph depicts a sample of missing incidents recorded by the police, and shows how these were distributed by age and gender (NPIA, 2011: 33).

Missing Incidents Recorded by the Police 2009/10



The graph shows that two-thirds (66%) of missing incidents concern children and young people under the age of 18, with those aged between 15 and 17 accounting for 34% of the total number of reported cases.

The age distribution of missing adults, shown above, appears to show similar trends to those seen in previous research. Research suggests that those aged between 24 and 30 are reported missing more frequently than any other adult age bracket. This is followed by those aged 18 to 23. From 30 years, there is a gradual reduction in the number of missing person reports (Biehal et al, 2003).

The gender distribution of police missing reports, across all age groups, shows that men account for more reports than women; 51% of missing person reports compared to 49% (NPIA, 2011: 15). This is contrary to the UK as a whole, where women account for 51% of the population. A 2003 study of cases reported to Missing People (then the National Missing Persons Helpline) found that, overall, males were more likely to be reported as missing than females; 63% of cases opened by the charity over a one-year period pertained to males (Biehal et al, 2003). The discrepancy between these figures can be attributed to the nature of cases the charity works on, which differ in characteristics from all police cases.¹

As the graph shows, during the teenage years, females are more likely to go missing than males. In adulthood, this trend reverses, as significantly more males are reported missing than females.

Data concerning individuals reported to Missing People appears to suggest similar trends, as 71% of 13-17 year olds reported to the charity were found to be female. In to adulthood, this pattern reverses, with the same study showing that 73% of people reported to Missing People aged 18 or over were male (Biehal et al, 2003).

Ethnic background

Whilst there is no accurate national data on the ethnic backgrounds of missing people, some profiling has been carried out on those reported to Missing People, and a number of police forces have also collated this information. The sparse nature of this data makes it difficult to establish any overall trends relating to ethnicity and missing.

One study shows that 86% of individuals reported to Missing People were white, 7% were from black communities (African-Caribbean or African background), 5% of Asian origin and 1% of mixed ethnic origin. When compared with national statistics, these figures appear to present an over-representation of individuals from minority ethnic backgrounds in missing reports (Biehal et al, 2003).

Employment and Residence

All walks of life and levels of privilege are represented within missing person reports, though some groups are more strongly represented than others.

¹ Cases reported to the charity tend to be those longer term cases which have been open for more than 48 hours, by which time the majority of police cases have been resolved. The charity also works on a number of cases that are not subject to a police investigation (family search cases). This means that the characteristics of the charity's cases sometimes diverge from those of police cases. (Newiss, 2011: 13-14).

A 2003 study found that a significant minority of missing people had been experiencing employment difficulties prior to going missing; just over half of those surveyed had been in employment or education. Levels of employment inevitably impacts on rates of income, with just 42 per cent fully supporting themselves, and the remainder relying on state benefits or other means such as a pension or support from their parents or partner (Biehal et al, 2003: 12). A later study similarly found that unemployment was high amongst missing people, with 60 per cent of those aged between 20 and 60 years – where employment information was available – being out of work when they were reported as missing (Tarling and Burrows, 2004:19).

The 2003 study analysing a sample of the charity's cases showed that 23% of missing adults reported to Missing People were living with their parents, and 39% were living with a partner, while 27% of missing adults lived alone (Biehal et al, 2003: 12).

Homelessness and missing are related issues and a large number of homeless people have also been missing, either currently or in the past. Nearly half of homeless 16-to-17 year-olds interviewed at Centrepoint projects had experience of running away (Centrepoint, 2001). Amongst both adults and children, homelessness can be understood as both a potential cause and a potential effect of going missing; homelessness can often occur as the result of going missing, whilst equally, homeless men and women are particularly at risk of going missing. Rough sleeping is also an issue for a proportion of people who go missing; in *Still Running II* 16% of children who had left home had slept rough at least once whilst away overnight (Rees and Lee, 2005: 18). In a sample of adults who had gone missing, 28% had slept rough at least once whilst they were away (Biehal, Mitchell and Wade, 2003: 27).

References

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