

Missing Children and Young People

Key Points

- Estimates suggest roughly two-thirds of all missing cases relate to children and young people, meaning around 140,000 people under the age of 18 go missing each year (The Home Office, 2010: 5).
- A wide variety of factors can lead to a child or young person going missing, from abduction by a stranger or family member, to either choosing or being forced to leave home or care for a variety of reasons.
- Children who go missing or run away have been found to be at increased risk of being harmed, which is exacerbated by the possibility of sleeping rough or committing crime to survive whilst away (Rees, 2011: 16-17).
- Over two-thirds of children who go missing or run away are not reported as such to the police, by their parent or by their carer (Rees, 2011: 19).

What are the characteristics of missing children and young people?

Various estimates show that children and young people account for around two-thirds of all missing cases. A 2010 report estimated that 140,000 people under the age of 18 go missing in the UK each year (The Home Office, 2010: 5). A separate study showed that 70 per cent of young people who went missing overnight believed that their parents or carers did not report them missing to the police on the most recent occasion of their going missing (Rees, 2011: 19).

Studies also show that the number of children and young people reported missing starts to rise sharply from the age of 13 and peaks at 15 before declining in the later teenage years (Biehal, Mitchell and Wade, 2003:10). Before the age of 13, the gender split amongst young people who go missing or run away is approximately equal. Between the ages of 13 and 17 years however, gender-specific trends start to emerge as girls become more likely to be reported missing than boys; 72 percent of 13-17 year olds reported to Missing People were found to be female (Biehal et al, 2003: 10). A 2011 study of over 11,000 young people aged between 14 and 16 also found that girls were slightly more likely to go missing than boys (Rees, 2011: 12).

Lost from View found that a large percentage (81%) of children and young people who went missing had been living with parents, with smaller numbers living in care, alone, with a partner, or with other relatives (Biehal et al, 2003: 12). Children and young people living in foster care or in a children's home were found to be three times more likely to go missing than young people living with their family (Rees and Lee, 2005: 12).

Why do children go missing?

Most prevalent amongst the factors contributing to children running away or going missing are problems at home, including conflicts with parents or other family members. A wide variety of causes can be noted, including physical or sexual abuse (Rees and Lee, 2005: 15-16).

Lost from View found that around 60 per cent of a sample of children who had gone missing had run away from home (Biehal et al, 2003: 22). Children and young people may also make an informed choice to leave a violent or dangerous situation and in such cases the line between being 'forced' to leave home and actively choosing to run away is blurred.

In one study over a quarter of the children who had gone missing said that they had been forced to leave their home (Rees and Lee, 2005: 18). Young people may be thrown out of their homes for any number of reasons, from issues arising from a young person's drug abuse to other behavioral issues, which can lead to acute or prolonged conflict between a young person and their parent or guardian (Biehal et al, 2003).

There are many ways in which children and young people can also go missing by force. Children can be abducted by a stranger, which is an offence under Section 2 of the Child Abduction Act 1984, though such cases are rare and comprise only a fraction of the overall numbers of children who go missing. In addition to stranger abduction, children may be abducted by a parent; this can occur when children are caught up in custodial battles between parents, and the non-custodial parent abducts the child which is an offence under Section 1 of the Child Abduction Act 1984. Children can potentially be placed at risk where a non-custodial parent is deemed an unfit guardian, who could endanger their child (CEOP, 2011: 8-9).

Children and young people are also at risk of going missing due to being groomed and trafficked for sexual exploitation. Vulnerable girls are particularly at risk of being groomed by older males who seek to gain their trust before committing sexual offences against them. Missing incidents often begin with, or are further exacerbated by relationships such as this (CEOP, 2011: 11).

A small number of missing children and young people's cases are a result of the dispersal of family members, and a subsequent loss of contact. Though such incidents are rare for children and young people, loss of contact through drifting often results in long term cases of missing, though where contact is made it is often reestablished willingly (Biehal et al, 2003: 24).

'Detached' describes children and young people who 'are away from home or care for lengthy periods of time and who live outside of key societal institutions such as family, education and other statutory services: who do not receive formal sources of support; and who are self-reliant and/or dependent upon informal support networks' (Smeaton, 2005 cited in CEOP, 2011: 10). Many of these children's experiences are normalised and subsequently they may not be reported missing, yet they remain highly vulnerable individuals.

What do children experience when missing?

Still Running III found that the most common place for young people to stay overnight was with friends (45%), followed by relatives (36%). Around one in six young people who went missing had slept rough or with someone they just met whilst they were away (Rees, 2011: 16).

Still Running II found that males (23%) were more likely to sleep rough than females (11%) and less likely to stay with relatives. The report also showed that young people who had been forced to leave home were more likely to stay with family members, whilst those who left by choice were more likely to stay with friends or sleep rough (Rees and Lee, 2005:18-19).

Around 11 per cent of young people said that they had been hurt or harmed while away from home on the only or most recent occasion (Rees, 2011: 16).

A separate study suggested that one in every eight young people who are reported missing have been physically hurt and one in nine have been sexually assaulted while away (Biehal et al, 2003: 32). These findings, coupled with the numbers of young people who sleep rough while missing emphasise the risks children and young people potentially face.

Still Running III also asked the young people it surveyed whether they had stolen, begged or done 'other things' in order to survive on the most recent occasion of their running away. Around one in five young people said that they had done at least one of these whilst away (Rees, 2011: 16).

What are the outcomes of missing person cases involving children and young people?

The duration of a missing incident and the likely outcomes are dependent upon the circumstances surrounding different types of cases.

Still Running III found that 38 per cent of children and young people who went missing returned within one night, whilst 16 per cent stayed away for more than 4 weeks (Rees, 2011: 16). These statistics differ from previous research on the total figures for all missing people. These suggest that roughly 91% of missing persons cases are closed within 48 hours, and only 3% of missing incidents last longer than one week. (NPIA, 2011: 26)

Over half of young people who went missing had done so more than once, with 22 per cent having gone missing three times or more (Rees, 2011: 11).

References

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For more information please contact the Policy and Research team by email at policyandresearch@missingpeople.org.uk