

Learning from fatal disappearances

A report by Missing People

Geoff Newiss

**missing
people**

Registered Charity No. 1020419

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This report may cause some distress to families of deceased missing persons and to those with a relative still missing. This research was undertaken, and is made publicly available, in the hope that policy and practice can be developed to minimise the number of fatal disappearances, and the suffering of families in the years ahead.

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Foreword

Clare was eating lunch in her boyfriend's garden on a Spring day in 2009. When he went inside to make a cup of tea, she rose from the table and walked out of the rear garden gate into the streets adjacent. She had left her purse, mobile phone, coat and medication behind. Later that evening the police were informed that she was missing – our lives then went 'on hold'.

Nothing can prepare you for it: the worry; the loss of appetite; the despair; the guilt; the tears; the memories; the hope; the disappointments; the frustration and the panic ... the panic, during those long sleepless nights.

For us, this tortuous journey ended after 25 days when Clare's body was found. The tears and outpouring of grief at the end (and for a long time after) was very painful. However, I think even then we recognised that 'knowing' was itself a small blessing.

Missing People is a very special charity. In our search for my sister they were the only agency that truly recognised the 'big picture'; the need for comprehensive cross-agency working, for effective information sharing, for good quality and well researched information and communication - and - are actually prepared to take the lead in doing something about it. This report and its recommendations are testament to that commitment, vision and action.

Richard Power

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Executive summary

Most people who go missing are found alive. Studies of missing people incidents recorded by the police show that approximately 1 in 100 missing people is found to have died. Whilst 1 in 10 of Missing People's cases ends with a fatal outcome, this is because the charity tends to be involved in longer-term disappearances for which the risk of being found dead increases (Newiss, 2006).

This study was based on an analysis of 250 disappearances closed by Missing People during 2006 and 2007, in which the missing person died. Secondary information sources were scrutinised, including the Missing People case files and, in some cases, death certificates and internet sources. The findings are divided between disappearances initially dealt with solely by the charity (non-police cases) and those initially investigated by the police.

This research reflects Missing People's commitment to establishing sound evidence for developing policy and practice in the field of missing persons. This evidence is used to help improve the charity's service and to highlight areas for development across the multi-agency response to missing people.

Non-police cases

64 of the fatal disappearances involved people not initially recorded as missing by the police. This may have been because relatives didn't involve the police or because the police didn't regard the disappearances as a missing person case.

There is no clear guidance or definition that distinguishes police from non-police missing person cases. Many individuals in the non-police cases appeared to have drifted out of contact with their families, rather than have suddenly disappeared.

On average, individuals were missing for eight years before they were reported to Missing People (compared to 12 days for the police cases).

The missing people in the non-police cases ranged in age from one to 88 years at the time of their disappearance, with an average age of 46 years. 56 individuals (87 per cent) were male and eight (13 per cent) were female.

Two adult males died as a result of an **accident**, both from a heroin overdose.

Nearly two-thirds (n=41) of the non-police cases involved death from **natural causes**. Information available from the death certificates indicated that alcohol abuse had precipitated the death of six of the missing people.

Three men, one in his late teenage years and two in their late twenties, had **taken their own lives**. In all three disappearances, the missing person had drifted apart from their family, precipitated by divorce, arguments or mental health problems.

Two men, both in their 30s, were found to have been the victim of **homicide**. In 16 other disappearances there was insufficient information to establish the circumstances of death.

In over two-thirds of the non-police cases for which a date of death was established, the person had died before they were reported missing, so family members could not have found their missing relative alive.

Most cases were resolved quickly. However, of the 34 disappearances reported to Missing People after the missing person had died, four took between six months and a year to resolve, and a further five took a year or more to resolve. Of the 15 missing people who were alive when reported to Missing People, 10

were alive for six months or more after being reported to the charity, but were not traced before their death.

Whilst it is not always possible to trace a missing person, these findings highlight the need for Missing People's tracing services to be prompt and comprehensive, in order to maximise the opportunity to find people whilst they are alive, and to resolve disappearances quickly after they have died.

Even if some people are traced they may not choose to contact their relatives looking for them. In two cases, a letter from Missing People was found in the possession of the deceased missing person, who had not contacted their family members.

Police cases

The police were the primary investigators in 186 of the fatal disappearances. These disappearances were reported to Missing People by a family member seeking support, or by police officers requiring assistance in the enquiry. The missing people ranged in age from 14 to 92 years at the time of their disappearance, with an average age of 44 years. 145 individuals (78 per cent) were male and 41 (22 per cent) were female.

20 missing people were found to have died because of an **accident**. Eight people drowned and seven, mainly elderly, people died from exposure to the natural elements.

In 17 disappearances the missing person was last seen socialising on a **night out**. All were later found in water, with the exception of one person for whom details of where they were found were not available.

In nine cases the missing person died through **natural causes**. Five people had an alcohol dependency, and in two cases alcohol intake was described as a contributor to their death.

The largest single category of fatal disappearances involved people who had **taken their own life** (29 per cent of police cases, rising to 56 per cent when

unexplained deaths are excluded). Most people were found outdoors, having died because of hanging, drowning or taking an overdose.

In 14 cases (8 per cent of police cases) the missing person was found to have been the victim of **homicide**. In nine disappearances the victim was missing for over one year before their body was discovered; their bodies having been hidden or disposed of to minimise the chance of discovery or identification. In 89 cases it was not possible to establish the type of death.

Several disappearances illustrate the difficulties authorities can have with identifying bodies, and matching them to records of missing people. While this study has not examined the processes for matching unidentified bodies with reports of missing persons, research indicates that knowledge of the problem is generally poor, and body-matching systems are prone to failure in many European countries (Cattaneo *et al*, 2000).

Vulnerability and risk assessment

Information for both police and non-police cases indicated a high proportion of missing people were vulnerable. Only 15 (23 per cent) of the non-police cases and 19 (10 per cent) of the police cases showed no evidence of vulnerability.

In the non-police cases the most common indicators of vulnerability were involvement in drugs or alcohol (one-third of the disappearances); the estrangement of the missing person from their family (20 per cent); divorce or family breakdown (16 per cent); and the missing person's poor physical health (14 per cent).

In the police cases the most common indicators of vulnerability were depression (not necessarily diagnosed; 44 per cent of disappearances); a lack of preparation to leave (31 per cent); information that the missing person was suicidal and/or had self-harmed (27 per cent); concern for the individual's physical health (24 per cent); and problems with alcohol or drug abuse (20 per cent).

Implications for risk assessment

While vulnerability indicators may increase concern for a missing person, further work is needed to establish the value of such information in predicting the likelihood of a fatal outcome.

However, attempts to identify single distinctive factors that set aside fatal from non-fatal disappearances are likely to be problematic. The low 'base rate' (the overall low ratio of fatal disappearances to non fatal disappearances) means that such factors must be able to predict rare events, without offering a high number of 'false positives' (predictions of a fatal outcome that turn out to be non-fatal) or 'false negatives' (predictions of a non-fatal outcome that turn out to be fatal) (Tarling and Burrows, 2004).

Scenario based risk assessment

A complementary approach would be to examine the 'scenarios' created when seeking to explain a disappearance. Creating scenarios is already recommended as a basis for developing search strategies (ACPO, 2006). In the context of risk assessment, scenarios might be considered as the narrative accounts of a disappearance which provide a suggested outcome of a disappearance based on a selection of factors about the individual or the circumstances of the episode.

Scenario 'testing' would require analysis of the (relative) frequency with which each scenario occurs. For example, analysis could be undertaken of the frequency with which young adult males last seen on a night out return of their own accord or are found deceased in water. Further research is needed to examine how scenario testing can inform risk assessment and the investigative response.

Multi-agency risk procedures

This study illustrates that even non-police cases can involve a high level of vulnerability to the missing person. In some disappearances, a missing person enquiry may be opened by a non-police agency when the missing person is alive but at a high risk of harm. Non-police agencies (especially Missing

People) need effective risk assessment systems. Procedures must also exist for a disappearance to be raised to the attention of the police when the risk to the missing person or others reaches a defined threshold.

15 people had gone missing from a hospital, mental health unit, hostel or care home. At least 14 more were known to be receiving professional care from GPs, community psychiatric nurses, social workers, psychiatrists and others when they went missing. The role of different care professionals in recognising, reporting and preventing people from going missing needs further exploration.

Recommendations

Missing People service development

1. Missing People should examine what additional resources are available to conduct comprehensive family tracing services in order to minimise the time taken to resolve disappearances when a missing person has died, and to maximise the opportunity for missing people to contact their families.
2. Research should be conducted to understand how missing people respond to receiving a family tracing letter from Missing People, and to identify ways to better support them.

Public awareness

3. Missing People should instigate an awareness raising campaign to encourage relatives who have drifted out of contact to report disappearances promptly. Timely reporting would maximise the opportunity to find their relatives alive.
4. Missing People should work with other agencies to draw attention to the danger faced by young adults of falling into water following a night out.

Reporting and police investigative criteria

5. ACPO and ACPOS should clarify the criteria by which some disappearances reported to police fail to result in a police enquiry. Procedures are

needed to help families reporting such disappearances to be referred to other agencies.

6. Research is needed to understand the responsibility of statutory, voluntary and private sector care providers to recognise a service user as a missing person and take action.

Risk assessment and searching

7. Police, Missing People and other relevant agencies should instigate a joint project to define and develop multi-agency risk assessment methods and procedures, including the sharing of information between agencies.
8. Police forces should record the presence or otherwise of standardised vulnerability indicators in all disappearances to enable future research to examine how these factors – alone and in combination – can predict specific fatal outcomes.
9. Further research is needed to examine if – and how – scenarios are constructed by different agencies, the types of scenarios adopted to explain different types of disappearances, how they affect the investigative response, the reliability of particular scenarios, and how they help develop search strategies
10. Further research is needed to improve search strategies and guidance based on empirical missing person scenarios.

Body matching

11. The government should initiate an immediate review to identify factors that prevent the matching of unidentified bodies with missing person reports, and establish a plan to remedy shortcomings.
12. ACPO and ACPOS should agree the procedures for recording basic details of disappearances that do not justify a police enquiry, so as to have a comprehensive register of missing persons for cross matching with unidentified bodies.

1. Introduction

Background

Only a small minority of missing people are found dead. Few disappearances reported to the police result in the death of the missing person. Newiss (2006) found that only 198 out of 32,705 missing person incidents (0.6 per cent) cancelled by the Metropolitan Police Service from January 2000 to September 2002 had a fatal outcome.

The proportion of disappearances recorded by Missing People that result in a fatality, although

small, is considerably higher than that recorded by the police. Between 2000 and 2008 an average of one in ten of all missing person records closed by the charity concluded with a fatal outcome.

The clearest reason for this is that the charity tends to become involved in missing person cases after the initial few days of police investigation. The third chapter of this report shows that individuals reported missing to the police were, on average, missing for 12 days before a case was opened by Missing

Missing People is a UK charity that provides support for missing and vulnerable people of all ages and their families.

Missing children and young people can contact Missing People free on Runaway Helpline by phone, email and text message. This service provides confidential advice and support around the clock.

For vulnerable missing adults, Missing People provides free, confidential, 24-hour advice and support, enabling callers to access support by phone and email. A key part of this dedicated service is that a missing adult can pass on a “safe and well” message to their family or carers, often leading to direct contact.

When someone disappears it is vital that their family can find advice and support immediately and for as long as the person is missing. That is why Missing People provides emotional and practical support via a 24-hour confidential helpline. The charity can also signpost families to further information, providing clarity at a time of great distress, as well as making referrals to local sources of help.

Missing People provides publicity services through partnerships with national, regional and local media. These media appeals generate information and sightings from the public 24 hours a day. Increasingly, Missing People is taking on an advocacy role for families, mostly by liaising on behalf of, and between, families and the statutory sector.

Missing People also helps people trace relatives, free-of-charge, who have drifted out of contact with their families. Whilst regarded as missing by their families, these individuals are either not reported missing to the police, or the police advise the family to contact a family tracing organisation. Missing People can make enquiries through a number of tracing partners, who can forward a letter from the charity to a missing person if they have their address. The partners do not reveal details of possible addresses to Missing People.

The letter from Missing People invites the missing person to contact us in confidence, to explore whether they might be reconnected in some way with their family.

People. By this time, many missing person enquiries have ended. Tarling and Burrows (2004) report that over three-quarters of missing persons were found within two days, and only eight per cent last longer than one week. Other research indicates that the risk of a missing person being found dead increases the longer they are missing (Newiss, 2006).

Whilst police forces are the primary investigators of a missing person, some police officers ask the charity for help to arrange publicity, receive and send details of sightings from the public, and support the family. Relatives of a missing person may also directly ask Missing People to provide the same services.

In addition, some missing people incidents are not reported to the police or, if they are, are referred to charities such as Missing People for assistance. These mainly involve family members who have lost touch over a long time, for whom family tracing services¹ rather than a physical search are used to further an enquiry. Both types of missing person case – police and non-police – can result in the missing person being found dead.

Aims of the study

This research reflects Missing People's commitment to establishing sound evidence for developing policy and practice. This evidence base informs the charity's service development and highlights areas for improvement in the multi-agency response to missing people.

This study had five aims:

1. To develop understanding of the common types and causes of death in missing person enquiries.
2. To understand the chronology of when people are reported missing, the date of their death and when their fate is discovered.
3. To identify types of missing persons or disappearances which are common to those disappearances resulting in death.
4. To identify lessons for responding to missing people cases, for all agencies involved.

¹ Family tracing services involve checks with a number of partner agencies to find a recent address of a named individual in their data systems.

² 'Substantive cases' are incidents in which Missing People undertook some type of activity, such as assisting with the media, distributing posters and supporting the family. At the time, Missing People recorded a larger number of 'enquiries'. These were (often very limited) records of disappearances sent to the charity by police forces, but for which no action was taken, often because the person was found soon after an enquiry was registered.

³ Death certificates were collected in 101 of the 250 cases from the General Registry Office or from the registry office where the death was registered. In the other cases, sufficient information was available on the circumstances of death from other sources or a death certificate was not obtainable.

5. To identify areas of research that may improve agencies' responses to missing people or help prevent deaths.

Method

This study is based on an analysis of disappearances closed at Missing People during 2006 and 2007, in which the missing person was discovered to have died. Missing People records all substantive disappearances² in an electronic case management system. This system was interrogated to identify all missing episodes closed during the two years, in which the missing person was found to have died. 250 disappearances were identified in total; 129 in 2006, and 121 in 2007.

The sample is based on the date disappearances were closed, not opened. Some enquiries began before 2006; indeed some cases were opened years before the sample period. More information on the duration of missing incidents is provided in the next two chapters.

Information on each of the 250 disappearances was collected from various sources. This includes information recorded on the case management system and in paper files.

Information on the cause and circumstances of a missing person's death was often not recorded on the Missing People files. More often than not, Missing People heard from the police that the missing person had been found deceased, so their record could be closed, but few details were given.

In a bid to collect more information on the circumstances of death, a death certificate was collected whenever no (or very few) details were available from the Missing People files³. An internet search was also conducted for each missing individual, providing information mainly taken from local media sources. Only factual information reported on internet sites (such as where the person was found) was recorded. Unfortunately, not all disappearances received much press coverage and, in many cases, no further information was

available.

All information was captured using a detailed coding framework. This covered the characteristics of the missing person, the relevant timings of the disappearance and their death, any apparent vulnerability indicators and the cause and circumstances of their death.

Ethics

This research focuses on disappearances where a person reported missing was found to have died.

While the aims of the research were to learn lessons from such incidents and improve agencies' responses, care has been taken to avoid causing further harm or distress to the families of the individuals featured in this research.

Information was not collected directly from family members, but from secondary sources (described above). While case studies appear in the following chapters, detailed information has been omitted to ensure confidentiality and reduce the likelihood of family members recognising accounts of their personal loss.

Limitations

The method selected to meet the aims of this study presents two important limitations to this research:

1. Representativeness

This study is based only on disappearances reported to Missing People, for which a full case was opened. Not all disappearances reported to the police are reported to Missing People. Further, not all disappearances are reported to the police, or to Missing People. The partiality of the sample means care should be taken with generalising the findings from this study to wider missing people populations.

2. Secondary source limitations

The findings that follow are based on an analysis of secondary sources (as described above). Whilst secondary source analysis is a cost-effective and

often very practical way of undertaking research, the information gained was not recorded specifically for research purposes. This means that the same amount and type of data was not necessarily available for each incident. In addition, systematic checks of data quality were limited.⁴

Structure of the report

The findings that follow are in two substantive chapters. The following chapter presents an analysis of 64 disappearances that began without police involvement. Many had no police involvement at all and were taken on by Missing People as family tracing enquiries.

Chapter 3 presents an analysis of 186 disappearances initially reported to the police, and later taken up by Missing People. Chapter 4 gives a discussion of the findings and makes recommendations for various agencies involved in missing person enquiries.

Summary of the cases

For ease of comparison, Table 1 gives details of the age, sex, ethnicity, nationality and type of death for police and non-police missing person cases.

Deaths by natural causes formed nearly two-thirds of non-police missing person fatalities. Suicide was the largest single known cause of death in police missing person cases. Further analysis is presented in the following two chapters.

⁴ However, comparison between information recorded in the case files with that recorded in the death certificates and that found on the internet, provided some means of identifying questionable information. Where different sources of information provided different data, a missing value was recorded.

Table 1: Summary of cases*Column percentages*

	Non-police cases		Police missing person cases		All cases	
	n=	(%)	n=	(%)	n=	(%)
Age						
0 to 17	1	(2)	7	(4)	8	(3)
18 to 64	53	(83)	157	(84)	210	(84)
65 and over	10	(16)	22	(12)	32	(13)
All	64	(100)	186	(100)	250	(100)
Sex						
Male	56	(87)	145	(78)	201	(80)
Female	8	(13)	41	(22)	49	(20)
All	64	(100)	186	(100)	250	(100)
Ethnicity⁵						
White-European	48	(75)	155	(83)	203	(81)
Dark-European	0	(0)	3	(2)	3	(1)
Asian	1	(2)	5	(3)	6	(2)
Afro-Caribbean	1	(2)	6	(3)	7	(3)
Unknown	14	(22)	17	(9)	31	(12)
All	64	(100)	186	(100)	250	(100)
Nationality						
British	58	(91)	166	(89)	224	(90)
Polish	3	(5)	3	(2)	6	(2)
Irish	2	(3)	2	(1)	4	(2)
Other European	1	(2)	11	(6)	12	(5)
Other non-European	0	(0)	4	(2)	4	(2)
All	64	(100)	186	(100)	250	(100)
Type of death						
Accident	2	(3)	20	(11)	22	(9)
Natural causes	41	(64)	9	(5)	50	(20)
Suicide	3	(5)	54	(29)	57	(23)
Homicide	2	(3)	14	(8)	16	(6)
Unexplained	16	(25)	89	(48)	105	(42)
All	64	(100)	186	(100)	250	(100)

Percentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding.

⁵ The ethnicity codes used in this study are the PNC codes (also called IC codes) used by police to describe ethnic appearance. This is the format in which Missing People receives information about ethnicity of missing people from the police. These reflect an officer's (or a reporter's) classification of a person's ethnicity. These are different from the codes with which police and other agencies invite people to classify their own ethnic appearance (using the 16+1 classification). Once missing people whose ethnic appearance was unknown are excluded, the proportion of White European appearance (93 per cent) is broadly comparable to the 92 per cent of the UK population identifying themselves as 'White' in the 2001 census (ONS, 2003). See Fitzgerald and Sibbitt, 1997 for a discussion of police ethnicity recording.

2. Non-police fatal disappearances

Summary of characteristics in non-police cases

	n=	(%)
Age		
0 to 17	1	(2)
18 to 64	53	(83)
65 and over	10	(16)
All	64	(100)
Average age	46 years*	
Age range	1 to 88 years	
Sex		
Male	56	(87)
Female	8	(13)
All	64	(100)
Ethnicity		
White-European	48	(75)
Dark-European	0	(0)
Asian	1	(2)
Afro-Caribbean	1	(2)
Unknown	14	(22)
All	64	(100)
Nationality		
British	58	(91)
Polish	3	(5)
Irish	2	(3)
Other European	1	(2)
Other non-European	0	(0)
All	64	(100)
Type of death		
Accident	2	(3)
Natural causes	41	(64)
Suicide	3	(5)
Homicide	2	(3)
Unexplained	16	(25)
All	64	(100)

Percentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding

* The mean and the median age was 46 years (standard deviation = 18 years; see Appendix, Table 10).

What are non-police cases?

Missing People opens enquiries on some disappearances which are not registered with the police. This may be because a family do not wish to report a disappearance to the police, or because they have tried to report a disappearance to the police but no enquiry has resulted. While there is no clear guidance or definition that distinguishes police from non-police cases, many non-police cases concern people who have been missing to their relatives for a long time before attempts are made to report their disappearance. Many involve families that have 'drifted' apart.

Biehal, Mitchell and Wade (2003) found that nearly one in five of the adult records opened by Missing People featured family members who had drifted apart. The majority had lost contact after moving away, within the UK or abroad, without leaving contact details with family members. In many cases, weak family ties erode with time, until contact ceases altogether. Once found, many of the people reported missing did not regard themselves as having been 'missing'.

Other families were found to drift apart as a result of one or more member adopting a 'transient lifestyle', often at the margins of society (ibid.). Typically male, many such individuals were misusing drugs and/or alcohol, had problems with their mental health, and had periods of sleeping rough or in hostels. Some individuals may have chosen to break contact with their relatives; others may have drifted apart as a result of their lifestyle.

Missing People delivers a different service to families depending on whether police are involved or not. In non-police cases, Missing People undertakes enquiries to trace a missing person using open data sources and through partner agencies. Missing People will often not know a missing person's whereabouts, but will ask a partner agency that has

a possible address to pass on a letter, inviting them to use the charity to re-establish contact with their family. Sometimes, missing individuals may receive a letter and choose not to acknowledge it, leaving both Missing People and the family unaware that they have been reached.

Missing People’s paper and electronic files provide information on any police involvement in a disappearance. All case files were scrutinised to identify disappearances that had no initial police contact.

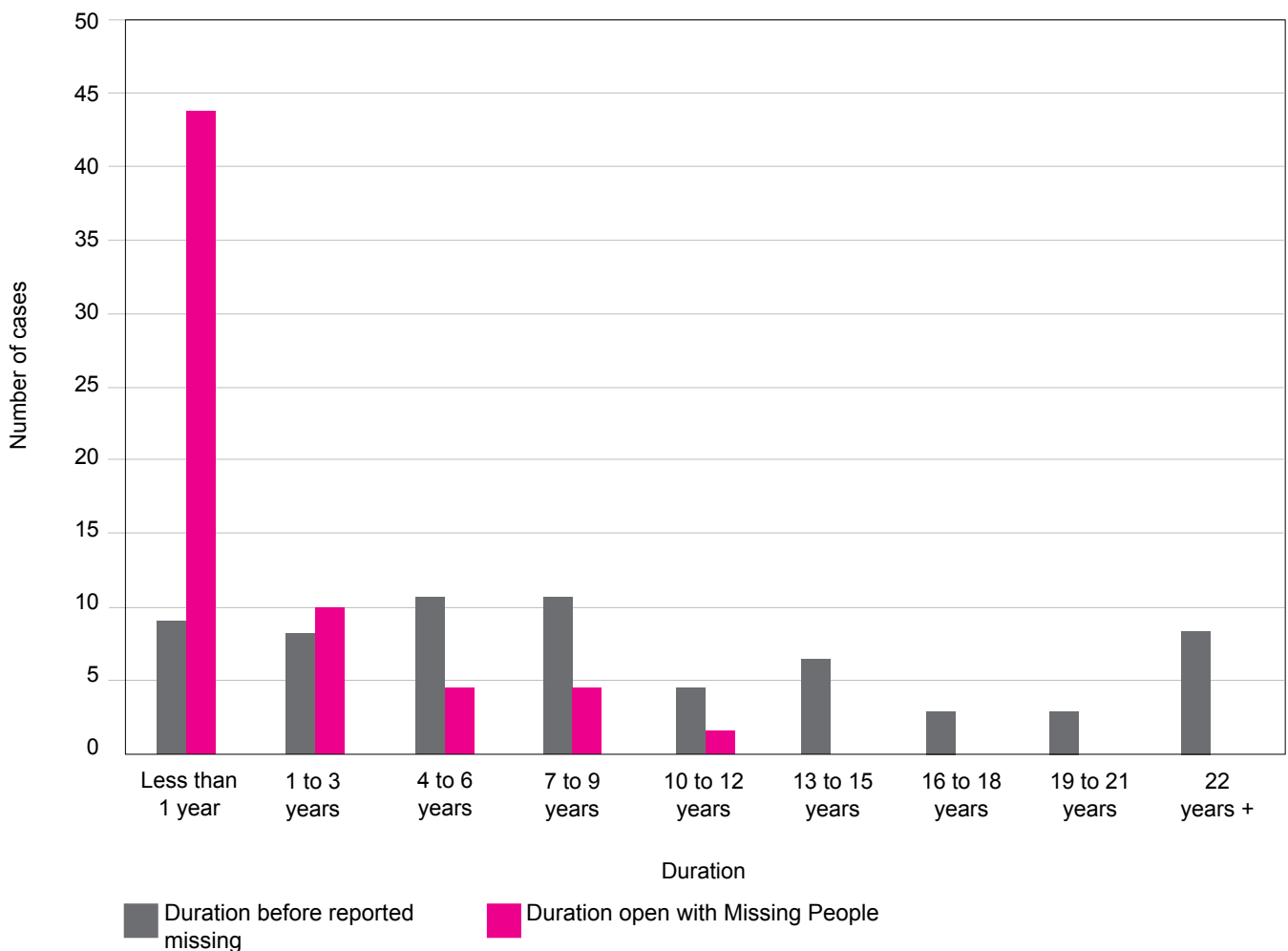
Of the 64 incidents meeting this criterion, six had police involvement later in the enquiry. In four cases, police became involved after the body of the missing person had been found, contacting the charity in an

attempt to identify next of kin to inform of the death (see below). In one case the missing person’s family first reported his absence to Missing People, and he was later reported missing to the police by statutory agencies. In another case, Missing People opened an enquiry for a family reluctant to report the disappearance of their relative to the police, although they were later persuaded by the charity’s staff to do so.

Duration missing

On average⁶, individuals whose cases had no initial police involvement were missing for eight years before a case was opened by Missing People. This compares to an average of 12 days for police cases (see Appendix, Table 12). This reflects the gradual loss of contact and the slow realisation that someone

Figure 1: Duration before reported to, and duration open with, Missing People (non-police cases)



⁶ Eight years is the median value. The mean was 10 years (standard deviation = nine years; see Appendix, Table 10). In most ‘average’ values given below, the median has been selected because the mean was distorted by a minority of very high value cases.

Table 2: Key time periods in cases where the person died before being reported missing (non-police cases)

Each row shows the time periods for an individual case, ordered by the third column

Period between date of disappearance and date of death	Period between date of death and date reported missing to Missing People	Period between date reported to Missing People and date case closed
2 years	26 years	0 days [^]
1 year	8 months	1 day
1 year	2 years	1 day
8 years	1 year	1 day
10 months	4 years	3 days
3 years	6 months	4 days
10 years	7 months	4 days
15 years	2 months	7 days
5 years	1 year	8 days
5 months	9 months	10 days
-5 years*	7 years	11 days
9 years	4 years	11 days
11 years	3 years	16 days
1 year	3 years	17 days
6 months	9 years	22 days
2 days	4 months	25 days
1 year	2 years	28 days
9 years	11 years	1 month
3 years	2 years	1 month
3 months	4 months	1 month
8 years	9 months	1 month
7 years	1 year	2 months
10 years	4 years	3 months
2 days	10 months	3 months
-3 years*	5 years	4 months
5 years	3 years	6 months
13 years	1 year	6 months
3 years	2 months	7 months
13 years	1 year	9 months
4 years	3 years	1 year
25 years	2 years	1 year
5 months	8 years	3 years
30 years	2 months	4 years
22 years	2 years	4 years

The rows in this table show the time periods for each of the 34 cases in which the date of death was established and was found to be before the individuals were reported to Missing People. They are ranked by increasing order of the duration taken to close the case after it had been reported to Missing People (shown in the third column). In a further 15 cases the missing person was known to have died after having been reported to Missing People (see Table 3). In 15 cases insufficient information was available to establish a date of death. Values in months and years have been truncated to show the number of whole months or years exceeded. For example, '3 years' indicates between three and four years.

* In two cases the person had died before they were recognised as missing. This may happen, for example, when the person reporting the disappearance does not know when the person was last seen or from when they have been missing since.

[^] In this case enquiries by Missing People revealed immediately (on the day the case was opened) that the person had died years before.

is missing in many non-police incidents. In contrast, many police cases began with an immediate cause for concern.

14 per cent of non-police cases (n=9) were opened within one year of the person going missing (the soonest an individual was reported missing was just after two months). In over half the disappearances, the individual was not reported to Missing People until after seven years since they were last seen. Nine incidents concerned individuals who were missing for 20 years or more before they were reported to Missing People (see Figure 1).

Cases remained open with Missing People from between less than one day to 12 years, the average duration being four months⁷. Two-thirds of enquiries were open for less than one year; seven cases were open for six years or more⁸ (see Figure 1).

In 49 of the 64 non-police cases, the date the missing person died was established, through the case files or information provided on a death

certificate. Comparing the date of death with when people were reported missing, and when the death was discovered (and the incident resolved), provides important observations.

People who had died before they were reported missing

In 34 disappearances (of the 49 in which a date of death was established) the person died before being reported missing. In other words, in over two-thirds of the fatal non-police cases family members had no opportunity to find their missing relative alive after they were reported missing. On average, individuals died 27 months before being reported missing⁹, though the periods ranged from just over two months to 26 years (see Table 2).

Of the 34 disappearances reported to Missing People after people had died, half (17 cases) were resolved within a month, and nearly three quarters within six months (see right hand column, Table 2). However, four cases took between six months and one year to resolve and a further five cases took

Table 3: Key time periods in cases where the person died after being reported missing (non-police cases)

Each row shows the time periods for an individual case, ordered by the second column

Period between date of disappearance and date reported to Missing People	Period between date reported to Missing People and date of death	Period between date of death and date case closed
9 years	6 days	1 day [^]
4 years	16 days	2 years
20 years	23 days	1 month
1 year	1 month	10 days
5 years	4 months	3 months
35 years	6 months	1 month
2 years	6 months	3 months
8 years	1 year	11 months
5 years	1 year	2 years
11 years	1 year	0 days [^]
9 years	1 year	4 days
8 years	2 years	1 year
4 years	4 years	2 years
20 years	7 years	2 years
2 months	9 years	12 days

The rows in this table show the time periods for each of the 15 cases in which the date of death was established and was found to be after the individuals were reported to Missing People. They are ranked by increasing order of the duration between the date the case was reported to Missing People and the date of death (shown in the second column). In a further 34 cases the missing person was known to have died before being reported to Missing People (see Table 2). In 15 cases insufficient information was available to establish a date of death. Values in months and years have been truncated to show the number of whole months or years exceeded. For example, '3 years' indicates between three and four years.

[^] Two cases closed within a day of the missing person dying. In both cases the police contacted Missing People to identify the deceased's next of kin.

Missing people whom the charity had reached

Two men were found dead with a tracing letter from Missing People in their possession. Both died soon after receiving the letter, one from alcohol related natural causes and one from coronary heart disease. In both cases the police contacted Missing People for help in identifying next of kin.

No conclusions can be drawn, from the information available, about the reaction of the two missing men to receiving a letter from Missing People. Further research is needed to understand more about vulnerable people's emotional and practical response to finding that family members are looking for them, and to identify ways to improve support for them.

one year or more. While it is not always possible to trace a missing person these findings highlight the need for Missing People's tracing services to be prompt and comprehensive if families are not to wait for long periods before being informed of the death of their relative.

People who died after being reported missing

In 15 disappearances the missing person was alive when reported to Missing People (see Table 3). In five cases the missing person died within six months of being reported to Missing People. In the remaining 10 cases the missing person was alive for at least six months after being reported to the charity. In four cases the missing person was alive for two years or more, including one person who was alive for over nine years after being reported missing.

It is impossible to tell how many missing people received a tracing letter from Missing People and did not act on it before their death. From the case files it was clear that two adult males had received letters from Missing People, which were found in their possession and used to identify next of kin (see below). Other individuals who died after being

reported missing may have known a relative was looking for them, but chose to remain missing.

In at least one other disappearance, a long delay in progressing enquiries was caused through difficulties in contacting the person who had reported the disappearance.

Identifying next of kin

In four disappearances, the police became involved after the body of the missing person had been found. For each, the police asked the charity to find next of kin to inform of the death.

Identifying next of kin when a body has been found presents a clear opportunity to resolve both police and non-police missing person enquiries. Done promptly, this can greatly benefit the family, who can escape the emotional trauma of searching for a missing person (see Holmes, 2008) and can begin the grieving process. Identifying next of kin might also help local authorities responsible for the burial or cremation of bodies where no suitable arrangements have been made¹⁰.

Unfortunately, finding the body of a missing person did not always lead to relatives being identified quickly. For example, in one of the non-police cases a man was reported missing by his family eight years after he had last been seen. Missing People tracing services eventually led to the discovery that he had died, at the time he went missing, of a drugs overdose. Despite an inquest being held and evidence of his identity existing, the family had never been traced or informed of the death.

Vulnerability

Many non-police cases feature families losing contact over a prolonged period. However, Missing People staff and volunteers find that many disappearances still present a clear cause for concern for the welfare of the missing person and, in some cases, the family reporting their disappearance.

⁷ Four months is the median value. The mean was 20 months (standard deviation = 35 months; see Appendix, Table 11).

⁸ Cases open for this length of time would probably have had enquiries exhausted at an earlier stage, and then have been made inactive pending further information.

⁹ 27 months is the median value. The mean was 44 months (nearly four years; standard deviation = 59 months), though this was distorted by several cases in which the person died many years before being reported missing, including one person reported missing 26 years after they died.

¹⁰ This obligation arises from Section 46 of the Public Health (Control of Disease) Act 1984

Table 4: Number of aggregate indicators of vulnerability (non-police cases)

	Type of vulnerability							
	Health-related		Lifestyle-related		Circumstance-related		All types	
Number of cases with	n=	(%)	n=	(%)	n=	(%)	n=	(%)
0 indicators	45	(70)	37	(58)	36	(56)	15	(23)
1 indicator	16	(25)	19	(30)	25	(39)	22	(34)
2 indicators	2	(3)	7	(11)	3	(5)	17	(27)
3 indicators	0	(0)	1	(2)	0	(0)	7	(11)
4 indicators	1	(2)	0	(0)	0	(0)	2	(3)
5 indicators	0	(0)	0	(0)	0	(0)	0	(0)
6 indicators	0	(0)	0	(0)	0	(0)	1	(2)
Total number of cases	64	(100)	64	(100)	64	(100)	64	(100)

Percentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding

The Missing People files on each of the disappearances were scrutinised to identify factors that might indicate the missing person’s vulnerability. It is not possible to know how exhaustive these findings are, as this secondary analysis relied on information reported to the charity and recorded by Missing People staff and volunteers while working on a case rather than systematically analysing risk.

Indicators of vulnerability were grouped into health, lifestyle and circumstance-related (such as estrangement from family, divorce or family breakdown) indicators. Figure 2 shows the full list of single indicators within each of the three categories. Table 4 shows that in 28 of the 64 non-police cases at least one circumstance-related indicator was present. In 27 disappearances, one or more lifestyle-related indicator was evident, and in 19 disappearances one or more health-related indicator existed. In only 15 cases was there no evidence of any type of vulnerability indicator.

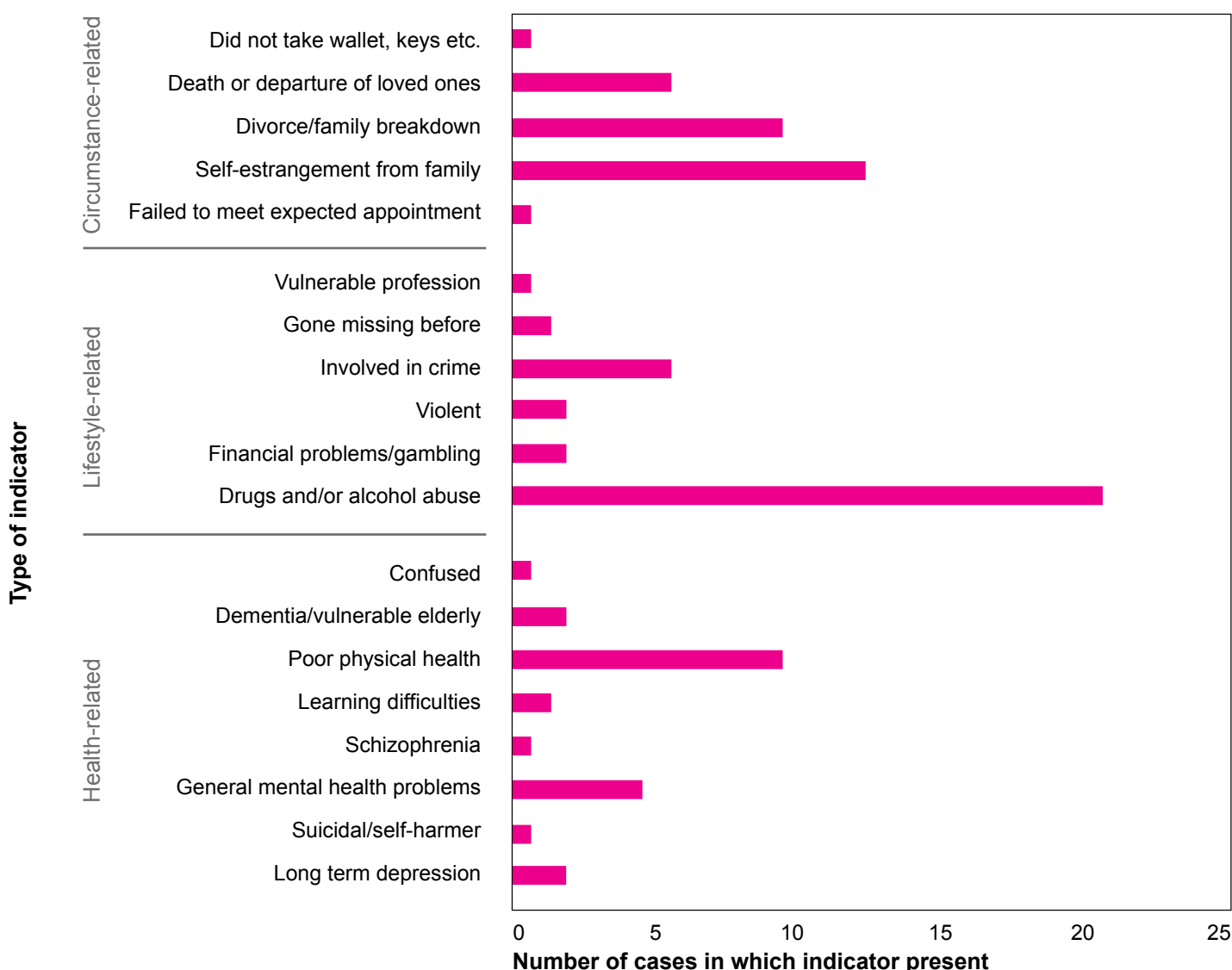
The most common vulnerability indicator was involvement in drugs or alcohol (recorded as a lifestyle-related indicator) which was reported in 21 of the 64 disappearances (one-third). In 13 cases

the estrangement of the missing person from their family (a circumstance-related indicator) raised particular concern, and in 10 disappearances divorce or family breakdown (again a circumstance-related indicator) indicated the missing person’s vulnerability. In nine cases the missing person’s poor physical health was recorded as a vulnerability indicator. The number of disappearances in which evidence was found of each specific indicator of vulnerability is shown in Figure 2.

It is not possible to say how effective these vulnerability indicators are as a measure of risk to the missing person. The data show that many fatal non-police cases appear to present indicators that the missing person might have been vulnerable. However, so too might the majority of non-police cases that do not result in death or other harm. More research is needed to test the reliability of indicators, alone and in combination, in predicting specific outcomes. This theme forms part of the discussion in chapter 4.

The following sections summarise the non-police cases according to five broad types of fatal outcome: accidents, deaths through natural causes, suicides, homicides and unexplained deaths.

Figure 2: Indicators of vulnerability (non-police cases)



Type of death

Accidents

Two white-European British males in their late 20s and early 30s were found to have died from a heroin overdose. One died in his own home; the other in a hotel (see Table 5). Family members had reported one man missing four years after he was last seen, and the other eight years after.

Both men had been involved in crime, and one had served a prison sentence before going missing. One

disappearance was resolved almost immediately when a check with a health authority revealed he had died three years before. Enquiries about the second man continued for nearly two years, using various tracing sources. He was finally discovered to have died under a different name, four years before he was reported missing, and four years after he had last been seen by his family.

Natural causes

Nearly two-thirds (n=41) of the non-police cases involved a death from natural causes. 20 missing

people died in a hospital or hospice, 13 died in their own home, and two died in a house (not their own), see Table 5.

The missing person in these disappearances had a higher average age (at the time of disappearance) of 51 years compared to an average age of 46 years across all non-police cases¹¹.

All eight of the non-police cases involving missing females died from natural causes. Nearly 60 per cent (33) of males in the non-police cases died from natural causes. In addition to 29 white-Europeans who died from natural causes, one Asian male, one Afro-Caribbean male, and 10 individuals of unknown ethnic origin died of natural causes. 39 of the missing people who died from natural causes were British; two were Irish.

On average, missing people who died from natural causes were missing for eight years¹² before they were reported missing to Missing People. However, this ranged from four disappearances reported within one year, to three individuals who were reported 30 years or more after they had last been seen.

In 24 disappearances, the missing person had died before being reported to Missing People. In 10 cases, the person had died after being reported missing to Missing People. In seven disappearances no information was available on when the missing person died. The cases remained open for an average of just less than three months¹³, and the majority (29 of the 41 cases) were open for less than one year.

Alcohol-related deaths

Information available from the death certificates indicated that alcohol abuse had precipitated the death of six of the missing people who died from natural causes. These disappearances were characterised by the missing person drifting apart from family members or cutting ties after arguing over their alcohol dependency. Tracing activity showed that at least four of the missing people had moved from one area to another, and there was evidence

Case study

Missing People was contacted in 2007 by the relative of a man last seen in 2001. He had left his family before 2001 and was known to be living on the streets. His chronic alcoholism had left him with serious medical conditions. It took Missing People six weeks to discover that the man had died in 2003.

that one individual had been homeless. Three died in hospital, and three died at their home address.

Suicide

Three missing people had taken their own lives¹⁴. One was found dead in woodland; no information was available on where the other two were found (see Table 5).

Each was a white-European British male. One was in his late teenage years, and the other two in their late twenties – younger than the average for non-police cases. Rates of suicide amongst men have been roughly three times that of women for the last 20 years (ONS, 2010)¹⁵. The highest rates of suicide are now for men aged between 15 and 44 years (ibid.).

Two people were described as having general mental health problems (though there was insufficient information in the case files to describe them as suicidal when reported missing). In all three disappearances, the missing person had drifted apart from their family because of divorce, arguments or mental health problems.

Two disappearances were reported to Missing People within two years of the missing person last being seen. In the other case, the missing person had not been seen for 17 years before being reported to the charity. The three disappearances remained open with Missing People for between three months and just over one year. The date of death was not possible to establish in two cases; in the third the person had died before being reported missing.

¹¹ 51 years was the mean age (standard deviation = 18 years; see Appendix, Table 10).

¹² Eight years is the median value. The mean was 11 years (standard deviation = 9 years; see Appendix, Table 11).

¹³ 85 days was the median value. The mean was 20 months (standard deviation = 36 months; see Appendix, Table 11).

¹⁴ It is possible that other individuals in the non-police cases had committed suicide. In 16 cases the cause of death was not known.

The difficulty in clearly distinguishing suicides from unexplained deaths is well documented (see, for example, Linsley *et al.*, 2001).

¹⁵ More information on the wider profile of suicide in the UK is given in the next chapter.

Homicide

Two white-European British males, both in their 30s, were found to have been the victim of homicide¹⁶. One was found dead in a river; the other died in hospital (see Table 5). Both were reported missing to the charity before the date they were known to have died – although the circumstances were quite different.

One man was missing from his family for over a year before being reported to Missing People. He lived away from his family, and suffered from mental health problems as well as alcohol dependence. When he was reported to Missing People, tracing services were started. Several weeks later his disappearance was reported to the police by professionals involved in his social care. Shortly after, he was killed after suffering months of abuse.

In the second disappearance, the person had been

out of contact with his family for nine years before being reported missing to Missing People. He was known to have been addicted to heroin and had spent time in prison and on the streets. He was also known to use different names. Despite many efforts Missing People was unable to trace him. Eventually his family told the charity he had died as a result of injuries sustained in an assault.

Unexplained deaths

In 16 disappearances insufficient information was available to establish the circumstances of the missing person's death (including one incident in which a coroner had recorded an open verdict). All disappearances involved males, 12 of white-European ethnic origin (and four unknown). The missing people ranged in age from 20 to 73 years at the time of disappearance.

Three suffered from poor physical health, and six

Table 5: Where the missing person was found (non-police cases)

Location died	Type of death					Total	(%)
	Accident	Natural causes	Suicide	Homicide	Unexplained		
Hospital / hospice (or grounds of)	0	20	0	1	0	21	(33)
In own home	1	13	0	0	0	14	(22)
In a house (or grounds of)	0	2	0	0	1	3	(5)
Inland water	0	0	0	1	0	1	(2)
Woodland	0	0	1	0	0	1	(2)
Other outside (park, field, ditch etc.)	0	0	0	0	1	1	(2)
Roadside	0	0	0	0	1	1	(2)
Industrial, commercial, transport premises (or grounds of)	1	0	0	0	0	1	(2)
Unknown	0	6	2	0	13	21	(33)
Total	2	41	3	2	16	64	(100)

Percentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding.

¹⁶ Homicide' is used because it was ascertained that offenders in one of the cases were convicted of manslaughter rather than murder. Information on whether an offender was convicted (and if so, of what) in the other case was not available.

were reported to have problems with drug or alcohol abuse. In two cases, the missing person had financial problems, and three men had a violent past or had been involved in crime. Two had gone missing before. One had failed to keep an appointment, and one had cut ties with their family. Two had experienced divorce or family breakdown. One had taken no wallet, keys or other belongings when they disappeared.

The time it took for families to report their loved ones missing to Missing People again ranged widely from just over three months (in three disappearances) to two cases that took 29 years. Most disappearances were open with Missing People for less than one year (n=10), although four were open for three years or more. In three cases the missing person had died after being reported missing to the charity (in one case eight years after being reported missing).

Summary

64 of the fatal disappearances involved people not initially recorded as missing by the police. This may have been because relatives didn't seek to involve the police or because the police didn't regard the disappearances as a missing person case. On average individuals were missing for eight years before they were reported to Missing People (this compares to 12 days for the police cases).

In 34 disappearances the individual was discovered to have died before they were reported missing to Missing People. On average, individuals had died over two years (27 months) before being reported missing, though this ranged from just over two months to 26 years. Half of these cases were resolved within one month and nearly three-quarters within six months. However, five cases took a year or more to resolve.

In 15 disappearances the missing person was still alive when reported to Missing People. In 10 cases the missing person was alive for more than six months after being reported to Missing People.

From the information available it was known that

two adult males had received tracing letters from Missing People, which were used by police to identify the next of kin. Other individuals who died after being reported missing may also have become aware that a relative was looking for them, but chose to remain missing.

From the information available, there was no evidence of any type of vulnerability indicator in less than one quarter (n=15) of the cases. The most common causes for concern were involvement in drugs or alcohol (reported in 21 of the 64 disappearances); the estrangement of the missing person from their family (reported in 13 cases); divorce or family breakdown (reported in 10 disappearances); and the individual's poor physical health (reported in nine cases).

Two adult males died as a result of an **accident**; both from a heroin overdose.

Nearly two-thirds (n=41) of the non-police cases involved death from **natural causes**. 20 missing people died in a hospital or hospice, 13 in their own home, and two in a house they did not live in. All eight non-police cases involving missing females died from natural causes. Nearly 60 per cent (33) of males in the non-police cases died from natural causes. Information available from the death certificates indicated that alcohol abuse had contributed to the death of six of the missing people who died from natural causes.

Three men, one in his late teenage years and two in their late twenties, had **taken their own lives**. In all three disappearances, the missing person had drifted apart from their family, precipitated by divorce, arguments or mental health problems.

Two men, both in their 30s, were found to have been the victim of **homicide**. One person was found dead in a river; the other died in hospital. Both were reported missing to the charity before the date they were known to have died. In a further 16 disappearances insufficient information was available to establish the circumstances of the missing person's death.

3. Police fatal disappearances

Summary of characteristics in police cases

	n=	(%)
Age		
0 to 17	7	(4)
18 to 64	157	(84)
65 and over	22	(12)
All	186	(100)
Average age	44 years*	
Age range	14 to 92 years	
Sex		
Male	145	(78)
Female	41	(22)
All	186	(100)
Ethnicity		
White-European	155	(83)
Dark-European	3	(2)
Asian	5	(3)
Afro-Caribbean	6	(3)
Unknown	17	(9)
All	186	(100)
Nationality		
British	166	(89)
Polish	3	(2)
Irish	2	(1)
Other European	11	(6)
Other non-European	4	(2)
All	186	(100)
Type of death		
Accident	20	(11)
Natural causes	9	(5)
Suicide	54	(29)
Homicide	14	(8)
Unexplained	89	(48)
All	186	(100)

Percentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding.

* The mean age was 44 years (standard deviation = 18 years; see Appendix, Table 10).

In 186 of the disappearances resulting in a fatality the police had opened an enquiry before Missing People became involved. These disappearances were reported to the charity either by a family member seeking support, or by police officers requesting our assistance.

Duration missing

On average¹⁷, individuals in the police cases were missing for 12 days before a file was opened by Missing People. Disappearances resulting in a fatal accident had the shortest average duration (median of seven days) from when a person was last seen to when they were reported to Missing People (see Table 7, page 34). Disappearances resulting in homicide had the longest duration from going missing to being reported missing (median of 25 days, see Table 7).

In one third of the disappearances (n=62) Missing People opened a file on the individual within one week of them going missing. Four-fifths (n=152) of cases were opened within a month of going missing. Cases for all but six disappearances were opened within one year of the person going missing (see Figure 3).

Three individuals were missing for over ten years before being reported to Missing People. Two were reported soon after the charity was established, and reflect the initial demand for family support services. Another case was opened in 2005 following contact with police conducting a 'cold case review' of an individual missing since the early 1990s.

The average duration for which a case remained open with Missing People was 28 days¹⁸. Nearly three-quarters of disappearances were closed within three months of being opened by Missing People. 88 per cent of disappearances were closed within

¹⁷ 12 days is the median value. The mean, which was 154 days (> five months), was distorted by the small number of cases with a very large duration between going missing and being reported to the charity (standard deviation = 1,022 days (> two years); see Appendix, Table 12).

¹⁸ 28 days is the median value. The mean was 248 days (> eight months; standard deviation = 757 days (> two years); see Appendix, Table 12). These figures show the duration from when a case was opened by Missing People to when it was closed. In some cases, the person may have been found, but a delay occurred between Missing People being told and closing the case.

one year (see Figure 3). 23 disappearances remained open with Missing People for longer than one year after a case was opened including four cases which were open for longer than ten years (two resulted in homicide and two in unexplained deaths). Disappearances resulting in homicide took considerably longer on average (median value of 445 days) to be resolved than disappearances resulting in other outcomes (see Table 7, page 34).

While it was not possible to establish the exact date of death in many cases and compare this to when the missing person was found, some disappearances highlight the difficulties that can arise with resolving these disappearances and ending the family's suffering.

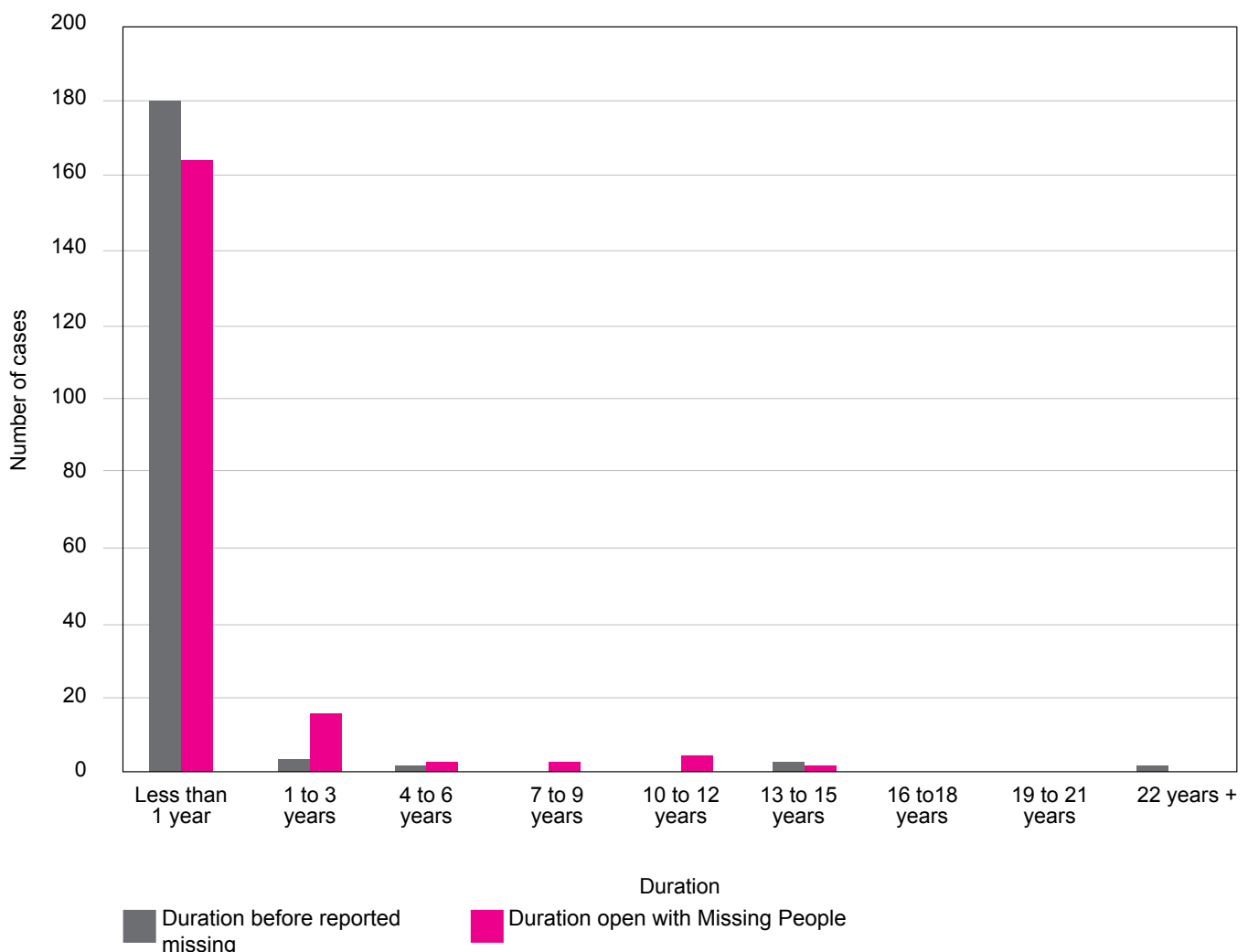
Body not found for long duration

Several disappearances highlight the difficulties

authorities can have in finding the bodies of missing people who have died. Sometimes this can be the result of a deliberate attempt to hide the body of a murder victim who has been reported missing (see later section on homicide). In other disappearances, the death of people in remote areas – by accident and suicide – seems to have delayed discovery for long periods.

ACPO guidance (2006) advises authorities to use 'scenario based searching' for missing people. This requires police officers to consider the reasons behind a disappearance, the motivation and ability of the missing person, and other factors that may hinder or assist a discovery when developing a search strategy. This study has not been able to test what scenarios were considered in these disappearances and how search strategies were formulated as a result.

Figure 3: Duration before reported to, and duration open with, Missing People (police cases)



Case study

A man in his late-40s was reported missing to Missing People a few days after he was last seen following a domestic argument. He was known to suffer from depression and had been described as suicidal. However, it was not until over two years later that his remains were discovered in woodland.

Body found but not identified for long duration

Several disappearances illustrate the difficulties authorities can experience when identifying bodies and matching them with missing person reports. Matters can be further complicated when bodies are found overseas. Whilst this study has not examined the processes for matching unidentified bodies with reports of missing persons, research indicates that knowledge of the problem is generally poor, and body-matching systems are prone to failure in many European countries (Cattaneo *et al*, 2000).

Case studies

Shortly after the charity started in 1994, Missing People opened a file on a British man who had gone missing abroad several years earlier. It was discovered that a body had been found and buried abroad soon after the person went missing. However, it was not until 2006 that DNA tests finally matched the body with the missing person.

Another British man went missing abroad in 2006. A body was soon discovered, but a match with the missing person was not confirmed until four months later.

The body of a 30 year-old man was found in the sea off the UK coastline some three weeks after he went missing in 2005. It took another four months before the body could be matched to the missing person

Vulnerability

The Missing People files on each of the fatal police cases were scrutinised for factors that might indicate the missing person's vulnerability. It is not possible to know how exhaustive these findings are, as this secondary analysis relied on information reported to the charity and recorded by Missing People staff and volunteers while working on a case rather than systematically analysing risk.

Table 6 shows the prevalence of vulnerability indicators in the 186 disappearances, in three broad groups of health, lifestyle and circumstance-related vulnerability. Figure 4 shows the specific indicators within each category.

In 70 per cent of the disappearances there was evidence of at least one indicator of health-related vulnerability. Just under two-thirds of disappearances presented at least one indicator of circumstance-related vulnerability. In 44 per cent of the disappearances there was evidence of at least one indicator of lifestyle-related vulnerability.

In only 19 of the 186 police cases (10 per cent) was there no information on potential vulnerability (see Table 6)¹⁹. In over half of the disappearances (n=98) there was evidence of between one and three vulnerability indicators, and in over one third of cases (n=69) there was information about four or more indicators.

Figure 4 shows the most common vulnerability indicators were depression²⁰ of the missing person (recorded in 44 per cent of disappearances); a lack of preparation to leave (for example, they did not take their wallet, keys, mobile phone etc. recorded in 31 per cent of disappearances); information that the missing person was suicidal and/or had self-harmed (recorded in 27 per cent of disappearances); concern for the individual's physical health (recorded in 24 per cent of disappearances); and problems with alcohol or drug abuse (recorded in 20 per cent of disappearances).

¹⁹ In these cases no information was available from the files to indicate vulnerability. That is not to say that no vulnerability existed. Indicators of vulnerability might not have been reported to the charity (by the police or the family) or might have been reported but not recorded in the files of Missing People.

²⁰ An indicator of vulnerability was recorded if depression was mentioned in any of the research sources. This does not necessarily mean that depression was clinically diagnosed. Specific references to schizophrenia were found in five cases, and these have been separated from 'general mental health problems' in Figure 4, which were non-specific. Neither indicator was necessarily clinically diagnosed.

Table 6: Number of aggregate indicators of vulnerability (police cases)

	Type of vulnerability							
	Health-related		Lifestyle -related		Circumstance -related		All types	
Number of cases with	n=	(%)	n=	(%)	n=	(%)	n=	(%)
0 indicators	55	(30)	104	(56)	68	(37)	19	(10)
1 indicator	56	(30)	58	(31)	59	(32)	26	(14)
2 indicators	50	(27)	20	(11)	52	(28)	38	(20)
3 indicators	19	(10)	3	(2)	7	(4)	34	(18)
4 indicators	6	(3)	1	(1)	0	(0)	33	(18)
5 indicators	0	(0)	0	(0)	0	(0)	26	(14)
6 indicators	0	(0)	0	(0)	0	(0)	7	(4)
7 indicators	0	(0)	0	(0)	0	(0)	3	(2)
Total number of cases	186	(100)	186	(100)	186	(100)	186	(100)

Percentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding.

While the presence of vulnerability indicators may well increase concern for the welfare of a missing person, further work is needed to establish the value of such information in predicting the likelihood of a fatal outcome occurring. This is developed in chapter 4.

Missing from health or social care location

In the files of 131 missing people reported to the police, there was evidence of at least one health-related indicator of vulnerability.

Of these 131 people, the information available indicated that at least six had gone missing from a hospital or mental health unit, four had discharged themselves from hospital and then gone missing, three had gone missing from a hostel, and two had gone missing from a care home. At least 14 more were known to be receiving professional care from GPs, community psychiatric nurses, social workers, psychiatrists and others when they went missing.

Information on who reported the person missing was rarely available. The missing people who disappeared from health or social care locations, or who were receiving care from professionals in their own home, featured in all five categories of fatal outcome: accidents, suicides, natural causes, homicides and unexplained deaths.

Case study

An elderly female suffering from dementia and severe mental health problems wandered away from a hospital ward. She was inadequately dressed for the winter climate. She later died of exposure.

The following sections summarise the police cases according to five broad types of fatal outcome: accidents, deaths through natural causes, suicides, homicides and unexplained deaths.

Type of death

Accidents

20 of the missing people reported to the police were found to have died because of an accident. These ranged in age from 14 to 92 years; their average age was 43 years²¹. Table 8 (page 35) shows the locations where accident victims were found.

Disappearances resulting in accidental death were reported to Missing People sooner than disappearances resulting in other fatal outcomes (median of 7 days, see Table 7, page 34), and were comparatively quick to conclude (median of 11 days open with Missing People, see Table 7).

²¹ The mean age was 43 years (standard deviation = 22 years; see Appendix, Table 10).

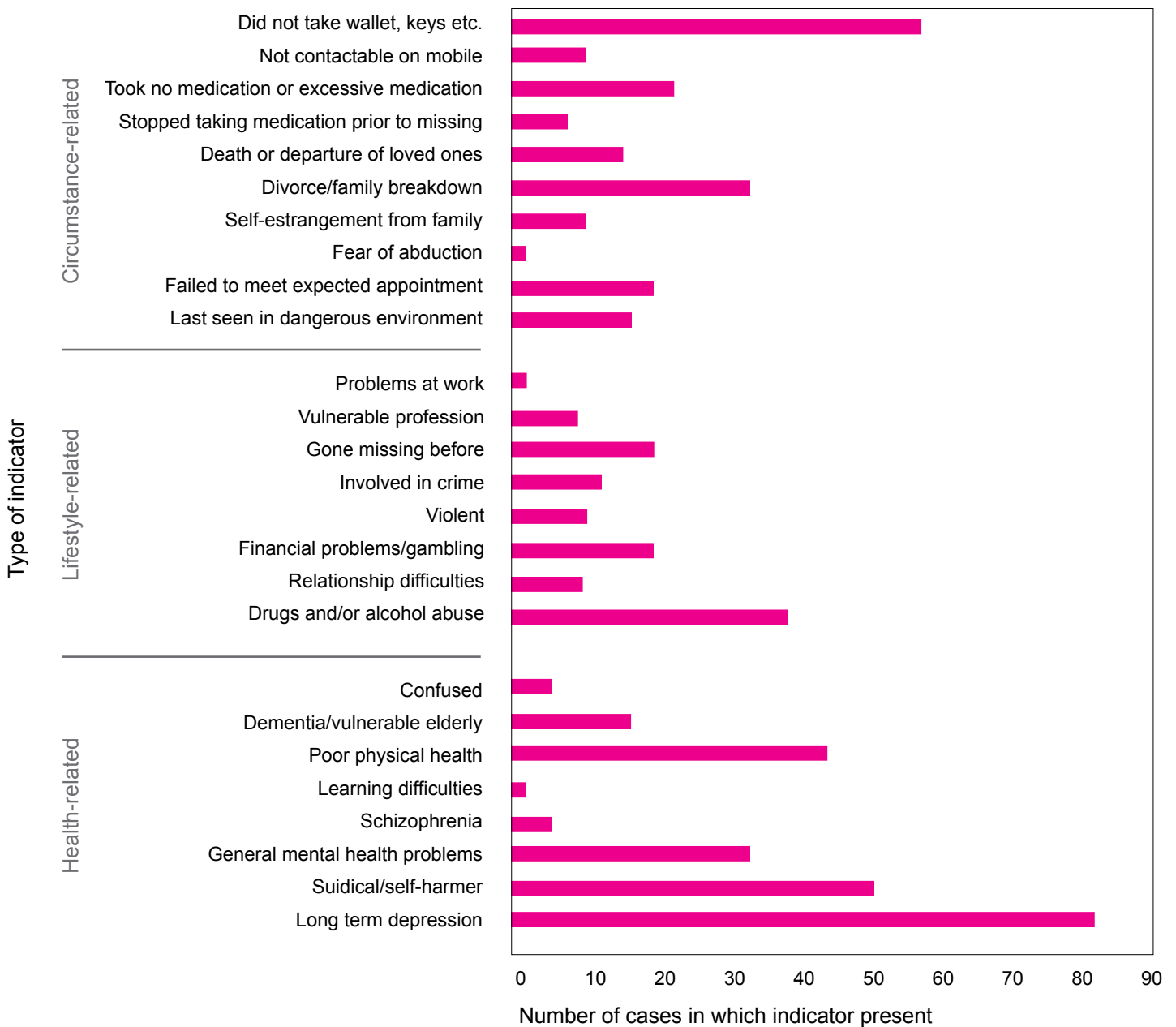
Drownings

In eight disappearances the missing person was known to have drowned (six in a river, one in a ditch, and one in the sea). All six people who drowned in a river were males aged between 22 and 33 years. All were last seen on a night out, and in five cases the missing person was known to have been drinking alcohol heavily. Young adult males last seen on a night out appear to present a discernible risk group.

Exposure to the natural elements

In seven disappearances, the missing person had died from exposure to the natural elements. Four were females aged between 52 and 82 years; three were males aged between 41 and 92 years. Five were missing between five and 11 days. One was missing for one and a half months, and one was missing for nearly five months.

Figure 4: Indicators of vulnerability (police cases)



Last seen on a night out

In 17 disappearances the missing person was last seen socialising on a night out.

All were male, aged between 18 and 39 years. One was Asian, one Afro Caribbean and 12 were white-European (the ethnicity of three missing people was not known). All but three were British, one was from Eastern Europe and two were from African nations. Three were students and 10 had jobs (this information was not available for the remaining four missing people).

In six disappearances the information available suggested the missing person had been drinking heavily (one post mortem revealed one of these had also taken a class A drug). It seems likely that in many of the remaining 11 incidents the missing person had been drinking, with seven known to have been in a nightclub and the remaining four having visited pubs or bars before going missing.

12 of the missing people were known to have drowned (10 in a river and two in the sea). Four others were found in water (three in a river and one in a dock) though it was not possible to establish if the cause of death was drowning. In one case no information was available on the cause of death or where the body was found. Where information was available, in all of the fatal disappearances in which a missing person was last seen on a night out, they were found in inland water or the sea.

In six disappearances it was established that the person had died as a result of an accident. In the remaining cases either insufficient information was available from the files to establish the type of death (n=6) or a coroner had officially recorded the type of death to be unexplained (n=5). This reflects a difficulty in establishing with certainty whether people found in water have had an accident, taken their own lives or been the victim of foul play.

Case study

One man was last seen on a pub crawl with friends from whom he became separated after having drunk over 10 pints of beer. He was reported missing to the police by his family the next day and shortly after to Missing People. His body was found in a nearby river a few days later, in what police described as 'no suspicious circumstances'.

In five cases the missing person had dementia or was regarded as a vulnerable elderly person (see text box opposite). Another missing person was in poor mental and physical health. Three of those who suffered from dementia had gone missing before. All seven were found at various outdoor locations.

Other accidental death

Three more missing people died from other accidental deaths. Two remained undiscovered having died as a result of a transport related accident. The third was missing for three weeks, having died in a house of a drugs overdose.

Not known

In two of the disappearances involving an accident there was insufficient information to be able to further categorise the circumstances of the death.

Natural causes

Nine of the police missing person cases were found to have died through natural causes. These people ranged in age from 40 to 89 years, with an average age of 57 year²², unsurprisingly higher than the average for all police cases. Seven were male and two female. One missing person was of Afro-Caribbean ethnic origin, the rest (bar one unknown) were white-European. All were of British nationality.

In eight of the disappearances the individual was reported missing to Missing People within one month of going missing; in the ninth case, the individual was reported to the charity just after three months of being missing (the median number of

²² The mean age was 57 years (standard deviation = 14 years; see Appendix, Table 10).

Vulnerable elderly people, including those with dementia

In a total of 15 of the police disappearances, it was clear from the information available that the missing person was suffering from dementia or was in a confused or vulnerable state when they went missing. These people ranged in age from 60 to 92 years. Eight were male and seven were female. All were white-European (with the ethnicity of two unknown). All were British except one person from Eastern Europe.

In five disappearances it was clear that the missing person had died of an accident (principally from becoming lost and dying of exposure). One very elderly lady had died of natural causes whilst walking outside. Two males in their late 60s took their own lives and were found in water – both were suffering from depression and one was clearly suicidal.

Insufficient information was available on the remaining seven cases, although they were missing for between six days and six months and all were eventually found outside.

Case study

A man in his early sixties, suffering from the early stages of dementia and in a very confused state, left the hospital where he was staying without notice. Police efforts involving dogs and helicopters failed to locate him. He was eventually discovered several days later dead in the hospital grounds. The coroner returned an open verdict, having been unable to ascertain the cause of death.

days taken for a disappearance resulting in a death from natural causes to be reported to Missing People was 12 days; see Table 7). Four disappearances remained open for less than one month (ranging from three to 18 days); three cases remained open between one and nine months; the other two cases remained

open for three and seven years (with a median of 44 days open with Missing People; see Table 7).

Five of the missing people were found outside, one died in hospital, one died in a house in the same town and another died in their own home (in one other case details of where the body was found were not available; see Table 8).

In five of the nine disappearances the missing person was known to have alcohol dependence or was a 'recovering alcoholic'. In two cases the death certificate cited 'cirrhosis' or 'alcohol intake' as a contributory factor in the death. The information available on the cases suggested that three of the five suffered from depression or mental health problems. Two were thought to be suicidal or had self-harmed.

In two cases the missing person was known to be sleeping rough, one was suffering from depression and was confused, and one was in poor physical health.

Suicide

In 54 of the police cases the missing person had taken their own life. This is the largest single category of all the fatal disappearances. It accounts for 29 per cent of the police cases, and rises to 56 per cent of police cases where the cause of death is known. This category was recorded if the death certificate gave suicide as the cause of death, or if the police confirmed suicide to be the cause of death. Given the difficulty with establishing with certainty the cause of death in some cases, it is likely that an unknown proportion of the unexplained cases will also comprise incidents in which missing people took their own lives²³.

Missing people who took their own lives ranged in age from 15 to 70, with an average age of 42 years²⁴. 42 were males (with an average age of 42 years) and 12 were female (with an average age of 44 years)²⁵. These findings are broadly inline with

²³ It is common practice for statistics and studies of suicide to now include deaths with an undetermined cause of death alongside those recorded as suicides given the difficulty in proving beyond reasonable doubt that suicide was intended (MIND online, b), and the similarity in profile of suicides and deaths of an undetermined nature (Linsley *et. al.*, 2001).

²⁴ The mean age was 42 years (standard deviation = 15 years; see Appendix, Table 10).

²⁵ The mean age for males who committed suicide was 42 years (standard deviation = 15 years); the mean age for females who committed suicide was 44 years (standard deviation = 16 years).

Table 7: Key time periods, by type of death (police cases)*Values given in days (truncated to months and years in brackets)***Period between date of disappearance and date reported to Missing People***

	n=	Median	Shortest	Longest
Accident	20	7	1	34 (1 month)
Natural causes	9	12	2	103 (3 months)
Suicide	54	10	3	159 (5 months)
Homicide	14	25	5	5,750 (15 years)
Unexplained	89	14	1	11,634 (31 years)
Total	186	12	1	11,634 (31 years)

Period case open with Missing People^

	n=	Median	Shortest	Longest
Accident	20	11	3	112
Natural causes	9	44 (1 month)	3	2,737 (7 years)
Suicide	54	22	0	811 (2 years)
Homicide	14	445 (1 year)	0	5,531 (15 years)
Unexplained	89	31 (1 month)	0	4,152 (11 years)
Total	186	28	0	5,531 (15 years)

Total duration missing (period between date of disappearance and date case closed with Missing People)~

	n=	Median	Shortest	Longest
Accident	20	20	5	146 (4 months)
Natural causes	9	61 (2 months)	13	2,749 (7 years)
Suicide	54	41 (1 month)	3	818 (2 years)
Homicide	14	548 (1 year)	5	10,189 (27 years)
Unexplained	89	52 (1 month)	4	14,925 (40 years)
Total	186	46 (1 month)	3	14,925 (40 years)

* 'Date of disappearance' was the date when the person was last seen or their disappearance first noted. Most cases were reported to the police before being reported to Missing People. In exceptional cases a disappearance was not reported to Missing People for many years after the people were known to have gone missing. Two were reported to the charity when it opened, reflecting an initial demand for the charity's services despite the cases already being many years old.

^ The duration for which the case remained open with Missing People. In some cases there may have been a time lag between the police learning of a missing individual's fate and their informing the charity.

~ The sum of the first two tables. The period from when the person was last seen or their disappearance first noted, through to when the case was closed by Missing People.

The median is given as the average value because the mean was frequently distorted by small numbers of cases with very large time periods (see Appendix, Table 12).

Values in months and years have been truncated to show the number of whole months or years exceeded. For example, '3 years' indicates any period over three years but less than four years.

Table 8: Where the missing person was found (police cases)

Location died	Type of vulnerability					Total	Row (%)
	Accident	Natural causes	Suicide	Homicide	Unexplained		
Inland water	7	0	13	2	24	46	(25)
Coastline	1	1	4	2	15	23	(12)
Woodland	0	1	12	2	10	25	(13)
Other outside (park, field, ditch etc.)	6	3	9	0	7	25	(13)
Roadside	3	0	1	0	3	7	(4)
Industrial, commercial, transport premises (or grounds of)	1	0	3	1	2	7	(4)
In a house (or grounds of)	1	1	2	4	0	8	(4)
In own home	0	1	0	2	0	3	(2)
Hospital / hospice (or grounds of)	0	1	0	0	1	2	(1)
Unknown	1	1	10	1	27	40	(22)
Total	20	9	54	14	89	186	(100)

Percentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding.

the national profile of all suicides. National statistics on suicide show the rate of suicide among men to have been roughly three times higher than the rate for women over the last twenty years (ONS, 2010). The rate of suicide among people aged 75 years and over has decreased considerably over the same period. For men, higher rates of suicide are now found amongst those aged 15 to 44 years, with a slightly lower rate in the 45 to 74 years age group. For women, the highest suicide rates are amongst those aged 45 to 74 years, with a consistently lower rate amongst women aged 15 to 44 years (ibid).

45 of the missing people were of white-European ethnic origin, three Asian and one Afro-Caribbean (with five unknown). Patterns of suicide vary among different ethnic groups in the UK, with some evidence of a comparatively high rate of suicide amongst young Asian women and a comparatively low rate of suicide amongst Asian men (MIND online, a). Whilst our sample represents only a fraction

of all suicides over the two year period, the fact that all three Asian missing persons who took their own lives were male lies at odds with the wider suicide profile. 49 of the missing people were of British nationality, and five others were from five different European nations.

In four out of five of these cases information recorded by the charity indicated that the missing person was suffering from long-term depression, was suicidal or had self-harmed, or was having mental health problems. This broadly matches wider suicide trends. Several studies have shown as many as 90 per cent of people who die by suicide have one or more psychiatric disorders at the time of their death, and one in four people who take their own lives will have had contact with specialist mental health services in the year before their death (MIND online, a).

In 13 disappearances the missing person was

known to be in poor physical health. The lifestyle of some of the missing people also gave rise for concern for their welfare, including drugs and alcohol problems (n=10), relationship problems (n=4), financial problems (n=6), involvement in crime or violence (n=6), and problems at work (n=2).

The circumstances of the missing people’s disappearances prompted concern in 60 per cent of the cases. One quarter went missing without taking their belongings, such as a wallet or keys. The same proportion was known to be experiencing stress as a result of divorce or general family breakdown. Others had left home without taking essential medication or had left home taking a great deal of medication prompting concern about their intentions. Several individuals had suffered a death or unexpected departure of a family member before going missing.

Table 9 shows where the missing people who took their own lives were found and the cause of death. The majority were found outside. In 13 cases the missing person was found hanging in woodland or another outside location. In 14 cases the missing person had drowned in inland water or in the sea. Three people had died of an overdose; all three were found outside.

On average²⁶, it took 10 days from when the individuals

were known to have gone missing for them to be reported to Missing People, ranging from three days to five months (see Table 7). Insufficient information was available on most disappearances to determine when each missing person died. Where information was available it appeared that the missing person took their own life shortly after going missing. In many cases the missing person had died before being reported missing, at least to Missing People.

However, whilst many missing people who took their own lives seemed to have died soon after going missing, a large proportion were not found for a long time after their disappearance. In just 15 cases (28 per cent of the 54 suicide cases) was the body of the missing person found²⁷ within 14 days. It took more than one month for 31 disappearances (57 per cent of the suicide cases) to be resolved. One third of the disappearances remained unresolved for more than three months, and two cases were not resolved until after one year. See Table 7 for more information on the duration for which individuals remained missing.

These findings have important implications for investigators. The longer it takes to find a missing person, the longer a family is left not knowing what has happened to their relative. Previous research (Grampian, 2007) has established quantitative

Table 9: Where the missing person was found and cause of death in suicide cases (police cases)

Where the body was found	Cause of death					Total
	Hanging	Drowning	Overdose	Other	Unknown	
Inland water	0	12	0	0	1	13
Coastline	0	2	0	1	1	4
Woodland	8	0	1	1	2	12
Other outside (park, field, ditch etc.)	5	0	2	1	1	9
Industrial, commercial, transport premises/grounds of	1	0	0	1	1	3
In a house/grounds of	2	0	0	0	0	2
Roadside	0	0	0	1	0	1
Unknown	1	0	0	0	9	10
All	17	14	3	5	15	54

²⁶ 10 days is the median value. The mean was 24 days (standard deviation = 33 days; see Appendix, Table 12).

²⁷ Unfortunately this analysis is based on the date the case was cancelled by Missing People rather than the date that the body was found, which was not always available.

search parameters and a profiling checklist to aid the investigation of enquiries where it is suspected that a missing person has taken (or intends to take) their own life.

Case studies

One man in his early-fifties, who was an informal hospital patient with mental health problems, disappeared from hospital. One witness reported seeing a man fitting his description jump into a nearby river. It was not until over a year later that remains of the man's body sufficient to enable identification were found in the river.

A woman in her early forties was reported missing to Missing People nearly two weeks after being reported to the police. She had been suffering from serious physical health problems and was both depressed and suicidal. Shortly before going missing she had stopped taking her medication. Notes on the case indicate that the police mounted an extensive search, using dogs and a helicopter with thermal imaging equipment. However, she remained missing for seven months before her remains were found amongst dense vegetation in a nature reserve.

Homicide

In 14 (8 per cent) of the police cases the missing person was found to have been the victim of homicide²⁸. The victims ranged in age from 14 to 86 years with an average age of 38 years²⁹. Six were male and eight female. Of these 14, one was Asian and one Afro-Caribbean; the rest were white-European (n= 10) or not known (n=2).

The most recently available statistics on homicide in England and Wales show that less than eight per cent of all offences recorded as homicide were for victims aged 15 or under (Coleman and Osborne, 2010). Two-thirds of all homicide victims were aged 16 to 49 years (ibid.).

In contrast to this study's sample of missing people found to be victims of homicide, most homicides are

committed against males (70 per cent of all recorded homicides involved male victims in 2008/09). More homicides were recorded for male victims than female victims in each age category, except for people over the age of 70 years, for whom nearly three times as many victims were female (ibid.). Only one missing person in this study's sample was aged over 70 and that victim was male.

Research (Newiss, 2004) has highlighted the much higher risk of a report of a female missing person culminating in homicide than that of their male counterparts. Homicides which begin as missing person enquiries are not representative of all homicides, but are often a reflection of those homicides in which the body of a missing person is not found immediately.

Whilst further data were not collected on the 14 homicides in this sample (for example, on the motive or the relationship between the victim and the offender) it seems clear that the types of homicides included in this sample (by virtue of their beginning as missing person enquiries) seem an unusual subset of all homicides.

In five of the homicide cases the victim was missing for a relatively short duration – between five days and six weeks. Two missing people were found in inland water, one in a car park, one in woodland and one in their own home (see Table 8 for information on where homicide victims were found). The victim found in his own home lived alone and was not reported missing for several weeks after he was last seen. His body was found shortly after the disappearance was reported to police.

In the nine other disappearances, the victim was missing for over a year before their body was discovered. Table 7 shows that disappearances resulting in homicide took much longer to resolve than disappearances resulting in other fatal outcomes. Homicide cases remained open with Missing People for over one year on average, compared to 28 days for all fatal disappearances (see Table 7).

²⁸ In 11 cases a conviction of murder had been secured. In one case, a conviction of murder had been overturned on appeal. In another case, an offender publicly admitted murdering the victim but the offence was never brought to trial (as the offender was already serving life sentences). In the remaining case, a murder charge had been brought but the case had not gone to court.

²⁹ The mean age was 38 years (standard deviation = 21 years; see Appendix, Table 10).

In three cases the victim had gone missing before the charity was established. These disappearances were not resolved until many years later and the charity's case notes illustrate the enormous effect these disappearances had on the family members left behind. In one case the victim's remains were found not long after he went missing, though it wasn't until many years later that police collected DNA from family members to compare with the remains and identify the victim.

In all nine disappearances where the person was missing for over a year, the body of the victim was either hidden or disposed of to minimise the chance of discovery or identification. Such disappearances pose particular investigative difficulties³⁰ and, of course, cause considerable suffering to the family.

Unexplained deaths

In 89 of the police cases it was not possible to establish the type of death. In 49 cases a death certificate was obtained which recorded an open verdict from the coroner. In the remaining 40 cases it was not possible to obtain a death certificate and the information available from the case files was insufficient to establish a type of death.

The individuals ranged in age from 14 to 81 years, with an average age of 45 years³¹. In 76 (85 per cent) of the unexplained disappearances, the missing person was male, and in 13 cases (15 per cent) female. 77 people were of white-European ethnic origin; three dark-European; two Afro-Caribbean; and seven unknown. 79 were British; nine people were from eight other European countries, and one person was from an African nation.

In 27 disappearances (nearly 30 per cent of the unexplained cases) no information was available about where the missing person was found. In the 63 cases where information was available, over 60 per cent were found in water. 24 people (over one third) were found in inland water and a further 15 (24 per cent) were found in coastal water (see Table 8).

Again, these cases illustrate the difficulty of establishing the exact circumstances of a death when a body is found in water. Whilst drowning caused death in 24 of the 39 disappearances in which the missing person was found in water, it was not possible to establish whether this resulted from an accident, suicide or homicide.

In addition to those disappearances in which missing people were found in water, two adult males were found hanging. In each case the coroner recorded the cause of death as hanging, but returned an open verdict. An open verdict was also recorded for a man suffering from depression who was found dead at the bottom of cliffs after leaving a note saying he was going to take his own life. In common with other research findings, it seems that some unexplained deaths are likely to be suicides (see, for example, Linsley *et. al.*, 2001).

A woman in her mid-60s with dementia and learning difficulties was found to have died from hypothermia after getting lost. An open verdict was recorded because the exact circumstances of the death were unknowable from the available evidence.

In the remaining unexplained cases, where the missing person was not found in water and where the cause of death was not established, the person remained missing for an average of 126 days compared to 46 days for all police fatal cases³². The length of time for which the body of a missing person remains undiscovered may affect whether a cause of death can be determined.

Summary

Individuals in the police cases were missing for an average of 12 days before a file was opened by Missing People. The average duration for which a case remained open with Missing People was 28 days. Disappearances resulting in homicide took considerably longer on average to be resolved than disappearances resulting in other outcomes.

³⁰ See, for example, Hanfland, Keppel and Weis (1997) for a discussion of the effect of offender behaviour in disposing of a body in child abduction murder offences.

³¹ The mean age was 45 years (standard deviation = 17 years; see Appendix, Table 10).

³² These are median values, and have been used because the mean was heavily distorted by a small number of cases lasting many years (see Appendix, Table 12).

Some disappearances remained unresolved for long periods because of deliberate attempts to hide the body of a person who has been murdered or because people died (through accident or suicide) in remote parts of the country. In other cases, disappearances remained unresolved because of delays in identifying bodies and matching them with missing person reports.

Only 19 of the 186 police cases (10 per cent) revealed no information on potential vulnerability. The most common indicators of vulnerability were depression (44 per cent of cases); a lack of preparation to leave (31 per cent of cases); information that the missing person was suicidal and/or had self-harmed (27 per cent); concern for the individual's physical health (24 per cent); and problems with alcohol or drug abuse (20 per cent).

In a sizeable minority of cases individuals had gone missing from a health or social care location. Six had gone missing from a hospital or mental health unit, four had discharged themselves from hospital and then gone missing, three had gone missing from a hostel, and two had gone missing from a care home.

At least 14 others were receiving care at the time they went missing from a range of professionals including GPs, community psychiatric nurses, social workers and psychiatrists. The missing people who disappeared from health or social care locations, or who were receiving care from professionals while in their own home, featured in all five fatal outcome categories: accidents, suicides, natural causes, homicides, and unexplained deaths.

20 missing people died because of an **accident**. Eight drowned and seven, mainly elderly people, died from exposure to the natural elements.

In 17 disappearances the missing person was last seen socialising on a **night out**. All were later found in water, with the exception of one person for whom details of where they were found were not available.

In nine cases the missing person died from **natural causes**. Five people had alcohol dependence and alcohol intake contributed to two deaths.

The largest single category of fatal disappearances involved people who had **taken their own life** (29 per cent of police cases, rising to 56 per cent when unexplained deaths are excluded). In four out of five cases the information available indicated that the missing person was suffering from long-term depression, was suicidal or had self-harmed, or was having mental health problems. The majority of people were found outdoors, having died as a result of hanging, drowning or taking an overdose.

In 14 cases (8 per cent of police cases) the missing person was found to have been the victim of **homicide**. Six victims were male and eight female, in contrast to the wider profile of homicides. In nine disappearances the victim was missing for over one year before their body was discovered; their body having been hidden or disposed of to minimise the chance of discovery or identification.

In 89 cases it was not possible to establish the type of death.

4. Discussion and recommendations

Most people who go missing are found alive. Studies of missing people incidents recorded by the police show that approximately one in 100 missing people is found to have died. Whilst one in 10 of Missing People's cases end with a fatal outcome, this is because the charity tends to be involved in longer-term disappearances for which the risk of being found dead increases (Newiss, 2006).

This study was based on an analysis of 250 disappearances closed by Missing People during 2006 and 2007, in which the missing person died. Secondary information sources were scrutinised, including the Missing People case files and, in some cases, death certificates and internet sources. The findings are divided between disappearances initially dealt with solely by the charity (non-police cases) and those initially investigated by the police.

Non-police cases

Some disappearances are either not reported to the police or are not accepted by them to be suitable for a police enquiry. Over the two years of 2006 and 2007, 64 non-police cases were closed by Missing People in which the missing person was found to have died.

The missing people in the non-police cases ranged in age from one to 88 years at the time of their disappearance, with an average age of 46 years. 56 individuals (87 per cent) were male and eight (13 per cent) were female.

Where information was available on where the missing person died, nearly half were found to have died in a hospital or hospice and a further third in their own home.

Two adult males died as a result of an **accident**; both from a heroin overdose.

Nearly two-thirds (n=41) of the non-police cases involved a death from **natural causes**. Information available from the death certificates indicated that alcohol abuse had precipitated the death of six of the missing people.

Three men, one in his late teenage years and two in their late twenties, had **taken their own lives**. In all three disappearances, the missing person had drifted apart from their family, precipitated by divorce, arguments or mental health problems.

Two men, both in their 30s, were found to have been the victim of **homicide**. In 16 other disappearances insufficient information was available to establish the circumstances of the missing person's death.

Definition and recording

There is no clear guidance or definition that distinguishes a police missing person case from a non-police case. Whilst the ACPO definition asserts that *'anyone whose whereabouts is unknown, whatever the circumstances of disappearance... will be considered missing until located and their well-being or otherwise established'* (2010:15), in practice police forces do not open enquiries on all reports of missing persons.

In the disappearances featured in this study, many missing people appeared to have drifted out of contact with their families, rather than have suddenly disappeared. On average, individuals were missing for eight years before they were reported to Missing People (compared to 12 days for the police cases). Only 14 per cent (9 people) were reported missing to the charity within a year of going missing; the earliest report was two months after the person went missing.

Whilst many of these individuals may have decided to go missing, or may not even have perceived themselves to be missing, many showed signs of vulnerability –through problems with their health, their lifestyle (one-third were known to have problems with drugs or alcohol) or because of the fracturing of family relationships at the time they went missing.

The police response when receiving reports of missing people who have drifted out of contact with their relatives requires further scrutiny. Guidance is needed on the circumstances in which the police might not accept a disappearance as a missing person enquiry, and the sources of help families reporting such disappearances should be referred to.

Some people for whom the police refuse to open a missing persons enquiry, will be found to have died. There is therefore a need for clear procedures on what information should be collected by the different organisations involved, to ensure early resolution if a body is found.

Encouraging early reporting

In over two-thirds of the non-police cases in which a date of death was established, the person had died before being reported missing. This gave family members no opportunity to find their missing relative alive. 50 per cent were found to have died less than two years before being reported missing.

The nature of these disappearances can make it difficult to draw up firm guidance for families on when to report someone missing. In some cases, reporting someone who has drifted out of contact might be motivated by a desire to tell them about important family events (such as the death of a relative) rather than by a serious concern for the missing person's welfare.

However, these findings illustrate that earlier reporting by families might improve their chances of being reconnected with their missing relative before it is too late to do so. This message needs to be

communicated to families of people who have drifted out of contact with their relatives.

The importance of effective tracing services

Of the 34 disappearances reported to Missing People after the people had died, half were resolved within one month, and nearly three quarters within six months. However, four disappearances took between six months and one year and a further five cases took more than a year to resolve.

In 15 cases the missing person was alive when reported to Missing People. In five cases the missing person died within six months of being reported to Missing People. The remaining 10 missing people were alive for more than six months after being reported to Missing People, but were not traced before their death. Four cases were open for more than two years, with the longest open for over nine years.

Whilst it is not always possible to trace a missing person, these findings highlight the need for Missing People's tracing services to be prompt and comprehensive. This would maximise the opportunity to find people while they are alive, and to resolve disappearances quickly after they have died.

Missing People's tracing activity seemed to have resulted in some missing people being told their relatives were looking for them. In two cases, a letter from the charity was found with the missing person. Further research is needed to understand more about vulnerable people's emotional and practical response to learning they are being looked for by family members, and to identify ways to improve the support available to them if necessary.

Identifying next of kin

In four disappearances, the police asked Missing People to help find next of kin details for the body of a (non-police) missing person. Identifying next of kin from non-police missing person records is an important way of resolving disappearances and bringing a

family's search for a missing person to a close. This highlights the need for clear processes in capturing information on missing incidents for which the police are not able to open a full enquiry.

Police cases

The police were the primary investigators in 186 of the fatal disappearances. These disappearances were reported to Missing People by a family member seeking support, or by police officers requesting assistance in the enquiry.

The missing people ranged in age from 14 to 92 years at the time of disappearance, with an average age of 44 years. 145 (78 per cent) were male and 41 (22 per cent) were female.

Individuals in the police cases were missing for an average of 12 days before a case was opened by Missing People. Three people were missing for over ten years before being reported to Missing People. Two of these were reported soon after the charity was established, reflecting the initial demand for family support services. Another case was opened in 2005 following contact with police conducting a 'cold case review' of an individual missing since the early 1990s.

When information was available on where the missing person was found, nearly half were found in inland water (e.g. a river, reservoir or canal) or in the sea. A further third died in woodland or other outside locations, such as a park, field or ditch.

20 missing people were found to have died because of an **accident**. Eight people drowned and seven, mainly elderly, people died from exposure to the natural elements.

In 17 disappearances the missing person was last seen socialising on a **night out**. All were later found in water, with the exception of one person for whom details of where they were found were not available.

In nine cases the missing person died through **natural causes**. Five people had an alcohol dependency, and

in two cases alcohol intake was described as a contributor to their death.

The largest single category of fatal disappearances involved people who had **taken their own life** (29 per cent of police cases, rising to 56 per cent when unexplained deaths are excluded). Most people were found outdoors, having died because of hanging, drowning or taking an overdose.

In 14 cases (8 per cent of police cases) the missing person was found to have been the victim of **homicide**. In nine disappearances the victim was missing for over one year before their body was discovered; their bodies having been hidden or disposed of in a way as to minimise the chance of discovery or identification. In 89 cases it was not possible to establish the type of death.

In 15 of the police cases the information available showed that the missing person was suffering from dementia or was in a confused or vulnerable state when they went missing. These people ranged in age from 60 to 92 years. Five died of an accident or misadventure (principally from becoming lost and dying of exposure), one died of natural causes, and two committed suicide. No information on the type of death was available in the other seven cases.

Finding bodies

Several disappearances highlight the difficulties authorities can experience in finding the bodies of missing people who have died. The deliberate attempt to hide the body of a person who had been murdered, and the death of people in remote areas – by accident and suicide – can all delay the resolution of a disappearance.

ACPO guidance (2006) makes clear that authorities should use 'scenario based searching' for missing people. This study has not been able to test what scenarios were considered in these disappearances and how searching strategies were formulated as a result. It is recommended that further research should test the reliability of scenario development in missing person cases (see below) and help develop standards for associated search strategies.

Identifying bodies

Several disappearances illustrate the difficulties authorities can experience in identifying bodies, and matching them to records of missing people.

In one case the body of a man found in the sea off the UK coastline took four months to be matched to the correct missing person report. In two cases the bodies of British men were found overseas – one was matched with the missing person report four months later, the other not until many years later.

While this study has not examined the processes for matching unidentified bodies with reports of missing persons, research indicates that knowledge of the problem is generally poor, and body-matching systems are prone to failure in many European countries (Cattaneo *et al*, 2000).

The National Policing Improvement Agency Missing Persons Bureau has undertaken recent initiatives to review old ('cold') cases in a bid to resolve some of the 1,000 unidentified bodies across the country (NPIA, 29 August 2010). Systems need to be optimised to ensure the matching of missing persons with old and newly discovered unidentified bodies.

Vulnerability and risk assessment

The Missing People files on all 250 disappearances were scrutinised to identify factors that might indicate the missing person's vulnerability. It is not possible to know how exhaustive this account is, given that this secondary analysis relied on information reported to the charity and recorded by Missing People staff and volunteers while working on a case rather than systematically analysing risk.

In both the police and the non-police cases the information available indicated a high proportion of missing people were vulnerable. In only 15 (23 per cent) of the non-police cases was there no evidence of vulnerability; in 10 disappearances (16 per cent) three more indicators of vulnerability

were identified. Only 19 (10 per cent) of the police cases scrutinised revealed no apparent vulnerability; 103 disappearances (55 per cent) were found to have three or more indicators of vulnerability.

In the non-police cases the most common indicators of vulnerability were involvement in drugs or alcohol (one-third of the disappearances); the estrangement of the missing person from their family (20 per cent); divorce or family breakdown (16 per cent); and the missing person's poor physical health (14 per cent).

In the police cases the most common indicators of vulnerability were depression (not necessarily diagnosed; 44 per cent of disappearances); a lack of preparation to leave (31 per cent); information that the missing person was suicidal and/or had self-harmed (27 per cent); concern for the individual's physical health (24 per cent); and problems with alcohol or drug abuse (20 per cent).

Implications for risk assessment

While vulnerability indicators may increase concern for the welfare of a missing person, further work is needed to establish the value of such information in predicting the likelihood of a fatal outcome. The findings show that many disappearances which result in death present indicators that the missing person might have been vulnerable. However, so too might most disappearances that do not result in death or other harm. More research is needed to test the reliability of indicators, alone and in combination, in predicting specific outcomes.

Research published by Grampian Police (2007) has documented several factors that may indicate missing people to be at risk of committing suicide. The presence of a suicide note and the individual talking of taking their own life were found to be 'strong indicators' that a depressed person might take their own life. Further statistical analysis of the relative strength of such indicators in predicting suicide would be helpful.

However, attempts to identify single distinctive factors that set aside fatal from non-fatal disappearances are likely to be problematic. The low 'base rate' (the overall low ratio of fatal disappearances to non fatal disappearances) means such factors must be able to predict rare events, without offering a high number of 'false positives' (predictions of a fatal outcome that turn out to be non-fatal) or 'false negatives' (predictions of a non-fatal outcome that turn out to be fatal) (Tarling and Burrows, 2004). Even in combination, the presence or absence of indicators of vulnerability may prove a relatively blunt risk assessment tool.

Scenario based risk assessment

A complementary approach would be to examine the 'scenarios' created when seeking to explain a disappearance. Creating scenarios is already recommended as a basis for developing search strategies (ACPO, 2006). In the context of risk assessment, scenarios might be considered as the narrative accounts of a disappearance that provide a suggested outcome of a disappearance based on a selection of factors about the individual or the circumstances of the episode. The role of the person (often a professional such as a police officer, but it could also be a family member) constructing the scenario is pivotal, although it seems likely that common scenarios emerge and are selected from the collective, heuristic experience of an organisation or group of people such as the police³³.

For example, two scenarios might be constructed around the disappearance of a young adult male last seen on a night out. The first might propose that the missing man will return relatively quickly having stayed with friends or acquaintances instead of returning home. The second might propose that the missing man has had a serious accident as a result of intoxication.

Scenario 'testing' would require analysis of the relative frequency with which each scenario occurs. For example, if for every report of a missing young adult male who was last seen on a night out and was found drowned there are 1,000 reports of

missing young adult males last seen on a night out who later returned home having intentionally stayed away, then the former scenario would empirically be shown to be rare.

If, however, nine out of 10 young adult males last seen on a night out are found dead in water (compared to one out of 10 who later return home), then the former scenario might well be expected to play a large part in framing the investigative response. Both scenarios might be developed by examining the likely outcome when the duration of the disappearance extends. For example, it might be hypothesised that if a young adult male last seen on a night out remains missing for 24 hours (during which time they would have had the chance to return home or make contact) then the likelihood of a fatal outcome arising will increase.

Further research is needed to examine how scenario testing can inform risk assessment and the investigative response³⁴.

Multi-agency risk procedures

This study has highlighted that even non-police cases can involve a high level of vulnerability to the missing person. In some disappearances, a missing person enquiry may be opened by a non-police agency when the missing person is alive but at high risk of harm. Non-police agencies (in particular, Missing People) need adequate systems to effectively assess risk. Procedures are also needed for a disappearance to be referred to the police when the risk to the missing person or others reaches a defined threshold. These procedures will need to take account of disappearances reported directly to Missing People, and in which family members have asked that police not be involved.

15 people had gone missing from a hospital, mental health unit, hostel or care home. At least 14 more were known to be receiving professional care from GPs, community psychiatric nurses, social workers, psychiatrists and others when they went missing. Insufficient information was available about the response of health and social care professionals to

³³ In this sense, the development of scenarios forms part of the clinical approach to risk assessment described by Newiss (2004). However, Grampian Police (2007) also acknowledge the merit in developing scenarios as a basis for formulating the appropriate response to missing incidents. They highlight four broad scenarios in particular: that the individual is lost, they have voluntarily gone missing, that they are under the influence of a third party, or that they have had an accident or suffered an injury or illness. The examples given in this study develop this approach by including descriptive factors about the individual or the disappearance alongside specific outcomes to form more detailed and precise scenarios.

³⁴ This approach would have parallels with developments in the use of homicide data to test the plausibility of scenarios in murder investigations and to prioritise offender groups (see, for example, Francis *et. al.*, 2004).

their clients' disappearances. However, these findings indicate that people involved in the professional care of vulnerable people may have an important role to play in recognising someone to be missing, raising the alarm when someone goes missing, and preventing people going missing. Some of these issues have been explored in existing NHS guidance, particularly for managers and practitioners in mental health settings (see Bartholomew, Duffy and Figgins, 2009).

Recommendations

This research reflects Missing People's commitment to establishing sound evidence for developing policy and practice in the field of missing persons. This evidence is used to help improve the charity's service and to highlight areas for development across the multi-agency response to missing people.

This report offers the following recommendations:

Missing People service development

1. Missing People should examine what additional resources are available to conduct comprehensive family tracing services in order to minimise the time taken to resolve disappearances when a missing person has died, and to maximise the opportunity for missing people to contact their families.
2. Research should be conducted to understand how missing people respond to receiving a family tracing letter from Missing People, and to identify ways to better support them.

Public awareness

3. Missing People should instigate an awareness raising campaign to encourage relatives who have drifted out of contact to report disappearances promptly. Timely reporting would maximise the opportunity to find their relatives alive.
4. Missing People should work with other agencies to draw attention to the danger faced by young adults of falling into water following a night out.

Reporting and police investigative criteria

5. ACPO and ACPOS should clarify the criteria by which some disappearances reported to police fail to result in a police enquiry. Procedures are needed to help families reporting such disappearances to be referred to other agencies.
6. Research is needed to understand the responsibility of statutory, voluntary and private sector care providers to recognise a service user as a missing person and take action.

Risk assessment and searching

7. Police, Missing People and other relevant agencies should instigate a joint project to define and develop multi-agency risk assessment methods and procedures, including the sharing of information between agencies.
8. Police forces should record the presence or otherwise of standardised vulnerability indicators in all disappearances to enable future research to examine how these factors – alone and in combination – can predict specific fatal outcomes.
9. Further research is needed to examine if – and how – scenarios are constructed by different agencies, the types of scenarios adopted to explain different types of disappearances, how they affect the investigative response, the reliability of particular scenarios, and how they help develop search strategies.
10. Further research is needed to improve search strategies and guidance based on empirical missing person scenarios.

Body matching

11. The government should initiate an immediate review to identify factors that prevent the matching of unidentified bodies with missing person reports, and establish a plan to remedy shortcomings.
12. ACPO and ACPOS should agree the procedures for recording basic details of disappearances that do not justify a police enquiry, so as to have a comprehensive register of missing persons for cross matching with unidentified bodies.

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Appendix

Table 10: Age of missing people (police and non-police cases)

	n=	Mean	SD	Median	Lowest	Highest
Non-police cases						
Accident	2	31	4	31	28	34
Natural causes	41	51	18	52	1	88
Suicide	3	24	6	27	18	28
Homicide	2	36	4	36	33	39
Unexplained	16	41	15	41	20	73
Total	64	46	18	47	1	88
Police cases						
Accident	20	43	22	34	14	92
Natural causes	9	57	14	55	40	89
Suicide	54	42	15	43	15	70
Homicide	14	38	21	36	14	86
Unexplained	89	45	17	46	14	81
Total	186	44	18	45	14	92

SD = standard deviation

Table 11: Key time periods, by type of death (non-police cases)

Values given in days (truncated to months and years in brackets)

Period between date of disappearance and date reported to Missing People*

	n=	Mean	SD	Median	Shortest	Longest
Accident	2	2,289 (6 years)	971 (2 years)	2,289 (6 years)	1,602 (4 years)	2,975 (8 years)
Natural causes	41	4,075 (11 years)	3,541 (9 years)	3,219 (8 years)	64 (2 months)	12,834 (35 years)
Suicide	3	2,384 (6 years)	3,354 (9 years)	588 (1 year)	310 (10 months)	6,254 (17 years)
Homicide	2	1,917 (5 years)	2,108 (5 years)	1,917 (5 years)	426 (1 year)	3,407 (9 years)
Unexplained	16	3,843 (10 years)	3,484 (9 years)	3,181 (8 years)	104 (3 months)	10,605 (29 years)
Total	64	3,815 (10 years)	3,409 (9 years)	3,154 (8 years)	64 (2 months)	12,834 (35 years)

Period case open with Missing People^

	n=	Mean	SD	Median	Shortest	Longest
Accident	2	337 (11 months)	475 (1 year)	337 (11 months)	1	673 (1 year)
Natural causes	41	618 (1 year)	1,090 (2 years)	85 (2 months)	1	4,403 (12 years)
Suicide	3	214 (7 months)	150 (4 months)	153 (5 months)	103 (3 months)	385 (1 year)
Homicide	2	346 (11 months)	426 (1 year)	346 (11 months)	45 (1 month)	647 (1 year)
Unexplained	16	737 (2 years)	1,215 (3 years)	185 (6 months)	0	3,702 (10 years)
Total	64	612 (1 year)	1,063 (2 years)	123 (4 months)	0	4,403 (12 years)

Total duration missing (period between date of disappearance and date case closed with Missing People)^

	n=	Mean	SD	Median	Shortest	Longest
Accident	2	2,626 (7 years)	1,446 (3 years)	2,626 (7 years)	1,603 (4 years)	3,648 (9 years)
Natural causes	41	4,693 (12 years)	4,030 (11 years)	3,454 (9 years)	215 (7 months)	14,845 (40 years)
Suicide	3	2,598 (7 years)	3,504 (9 years)	741 (2 years)	413 (1 year)	6,639 (18 years)
Homicide	2	2,263 (6 years)	2,534 (6 years)	2,263 (6 years)	471 (1 year)	4,054 (11 years)
Unexplained	16	4,580 (12 years)	4,232 (11 years)	4,044 (11 years)	161 (5 months)	14,307 (39 years)
Total	64	4,426 (12 years)	3,945 (10 years)	3,532 (9 years)	161 (5 months)	14,845 (40 years)

* 'Date of disappearance' is the date when the person was last seen or when their disappearance was first noted. Most cases were reported to the police before being reported to Missing People. ^ The duration for which the case remained open with Missing People. In some cases there may have been a time lag between the police learning of a missing individual's fate and their informing the charity. ~ The sum of the first two tables. The period from when the person was last seen or their disappearance was first noted, through to when the case was closed by Missing People. (SD = standard deviation). Values in months and years have been truncated to show the number of whole months or years exceeded. For example, '3 years' indicates any period between three and four years.

Table 12: Key time periods, by type of death (police cases)

Values given in days (truncated to months and years in brackets)

Period between date of disappearance and date reported to Missing People *

	n=	Mean	SD	Median	Shortest	Longest
Accident	20	8	8	7	1	34 (1 month)
Natural causes	9	22	32 (1 month)	12	2	103 (3 months)
Suicide	54	24	33 (1 month)	10	3	159 (5 months)
Homicide	14	855 (2 years)	1,949 (5 years)	25	5	5,750 (15 years)
Unexplained	89	168 (5 months)	1,240 (3 years)	14	1	11,634 (31 years)
Total	186	154 (5 months)	1,022 (2 years)	12	1	11,634 (31 years)

Period case open with Missing People^

	n=	Mean	SD	Median	Shortest	Longest
Accident	20	20	26	11	3	112
Natural causes	9	505 (1 year)	947 (2 years)	44 (1 month)	3	2,737 (7 years)
Suicide	54	59 (1 month)	124 (4 months)	22	0	811 (2 years)
Homicide	14	1,069 (2 years)	1,733 (4 years)	445 (1 year)	0	5,531 (15 years)
Unexplained	89	258 (8 months)	722 (1 year)	31 (1 month)	0	4,152 (11 years)
Total	186	248 (8 months)	757 (2 years)	28	0	5,531 (15 years)

Total duration missing (period between date of disappearance and date case closed with Missing People)^

	n=	Mean	SD	Median	Shortest	Longest
Accident	20	28	32 (1 month)	20	5	146 (4 months)
Natural causes	9	527 (1 year)	944 (2 years)	61 (2 months)	13	2,749 (7 years)
Suicide	54	83 (2 months)	127 (4 months)	41 (1 month)	3	818 (2 years)
Homicide	14	1,924 (5 years)	3,153 (8 years)	548 (1 year)	5	10,189 (27 years)
Unexplained	89	426 (1 year)	1,730 (4 years)	52 (1 month)	4	14,925 (40 years)
Total	186	402 (1 year)	1,545 (4 years)	46 (1 month)	3	14,925 (40 years)

* 'Date of disappearance' is the date when the person was last seen or when their disappearance was first noted. Most cases were reported to the police before being reported to Missing People.

^ The duration for which the case remained open with Missing People. In some cases there may have been a time lag between the police learning of a missing individual's fate and their informing the charity.

~ The sum of the first two tables. The period from when the person was last seen or their disappearance was first noted, through to when the case was closed by Missing People. (SD = standard deviation)

Values in months and years have been truncated to show the number of whole months or years exceeded. For example, '3 years' indicates any period between three and four years.

