

# Lost from view

## Missing persons in the UK

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# Missing people: defining the issue

Many thousands of people are reported missing each year, yet little is known about who they are, why they leave, and what happens to them while they are missing. In particular, very little is known about *adults* who go missing. Although there has been more research on missing children and young people, most of this has focused on those who run away and little attention has been paid to those reported missing in other circumstances.

This report focuses on the entire spectrum of missing persons and includes those who go missing in a wide variety of circumstances, ranging from those who become missing as very young children to those who do so in old age. This diverse group includes both people on the margins of society and those living unremarkable lives in the mainstream, those who have chosen to go missing and those who have been compelled to do so.

This is the first study to directly report the views of missing people themselves. It provides a profile of people who go missing and explores both their motivations for doing so and their experiences while away. It also explores the outcomes of missing episodes, including whether, and in what circumstances, missing people return home or at least renew contact with those they left behind. Finally, it focuses on policy responses to missing people and discusses how they and their families might be better supported.

## Public concern about missing people

The Suzy Lamplugh case in 1986 generated a great deal of public interest in missing people. More recently, the abductions of children such as Sarah Payne and Milly Dowler have reawakened public concern about missing children. However, while abduction by strangers understandably has a high media profile, such cases are rare and the circumstances in which most missing persons disappear are not suspicious.

Other cases occasionally reported in the media concern missing people with amnesia. Some of these may be suffering from a disorder known as dissociative fugue, which is defined as an episode of amnesia in which there is an “inability to recall some or all of one’s past and either the loss of one’s identity or the formation of a new identity occur with sudden, unexpected, purposeful travel away from home” (Beers and Berkow, 1999). These episodes are usually brief and, like stranger abduction, are very rare, although they are more common in connection with wars, accidents or natural disasters.

Running away by children and young people is more common than either of the above and has a long history both in fiction (for example, *Oliver Twist*) and in reality. In Britain in the late 1980s, concern about young runaways led to the commissioning of research into the nature and extent of the problem (Newman, 1989; Abrahams and Mungall, 1992). This concern was heightened in the 1990s by the discovery of the gruesome murders by Fred and Rosemary West, as a number of their victims were young runaways. The

Labour government's continuing concern about young runaways has recently led to a special investigation by the Social Exclusion Unit (Social Exclusion Unit, 2001).

Running away from public care has always been a particular problem. From the first formalised provision for destitute children under the Poor Law in the 16th century, running away from charity schools, workhouses and foster carers has been well documented (Pinchbeck and Hewitt, 1973). The dramatic rise in absconding from residential institutions for young people in the postwar years led to a number of investigations during the 1970s (Sinclair, 1971; Millham et al, 1977). More recently, government concern about young people missing from care has led to detailed research into the problem and the production of guidance on policy and practice (Wade and Biehal, 1998; Biehal and Wade, 2002).

Missing adults have generated far less policy attention than young runaways, although this situation is beginning to change. In Britain, the police and non-governmental organisations working with missing people have recently reviewed their policies and are planning to improve coordination of their work (Compass Partnership, 2000).

## Defining 'going missing'

Despite public concern about missing people, there has been little clarity as to the nature of 'going missing'. Although young runaways are indeed an important group, the other popular conceptions of missing people described above refer to only a tiny proportion of those who go missing. So what, exactly, is meant by 'going missing'?

Going missing is not an easy phenomenon to define. It may at first appear to be a question of intention – did the person *intend* to go missing, is there a *deliberate* break in contact with partners, parents, children or siblings? However, this definition does not encompass those who are undoubtedly missing, but without any intention on their own part. They may have been forcibly removed by another person, have had an accident, or they may have disappeared because they suffer from a condition, such as

dementia, which diminishes their powers of rational decision making.

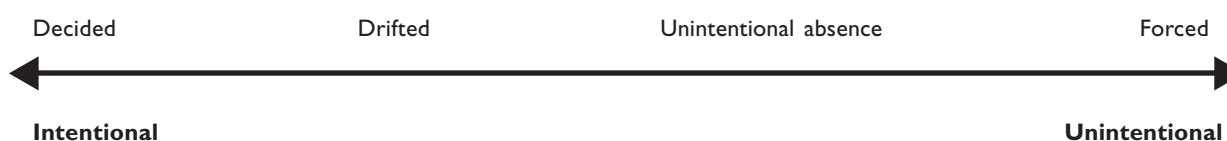
Then there is the question of whether being a missing person is a chosen or ascribed status. Some missing people do not consider themselves to be missing at all, they may consider that they have simply made a new life elsewhere. However, individuals may be 'missing' in the eyes of those who want to trace them, if not in their own eyes (Rogers, 1986). This raises the question: for whom is the absence a problem? If an individual's absence from their normal social network is seen as unexpected, distressing or unacceptable, others may define them as missing. Yet placing the power of definition with the people left behind may result in the missing person being defined as deviant (Payne, 1992, 1995). Missing people and those who report them may each have very different definitions of the situation, yet if missing people are seen as passive victims of a labelling process, they may be depicted as having little autonomy or conscious choice (Biehal and Wade, 2000).

There is certainly an implicit recognition by the police and by missing persons agencies of the problematic nature of a definition that originates with those left behind. All agencies operate with the principle that, with a few exceptions, it is the right of any adult to go missing and their right to remain 'missing' if they do not wish their whereabouts to be revealed. The only exceptions to this are adults sectioned under the 1983 Mental Health Act or those wanted for a crime, both of whom lose their right to remain 'missing' and who the police are authorised to apprehend if they are found.

For the purpose of this study, going missing has been defined as a break in contact which *either* the missing person *or* someone else defines as going missing, and which may be either intentional or unintentional. The analysis led to the conceptualisation of being missing along a continuum (see Figure 1) ranging from an intentional break in contact, deliberately chosen by the missing person, to an unintentional break in contact, which is not of their choosing (although it may have been imposed by others).

At the *intentional* end of the continuum are cases where individuals clearly intend to leave, without informing their families of their whereabouts. Their



**Figure 1: The missing continuum**

decision to leave may relate to difficulties within family relationships and/or difficulties experienced outside the family environment, such as financial worries, or to personal difficulties such as mental health problems.

Towards the *unintentional* end of the continuum are those who clearly do not intend to go missing. These include vulnerable people who may have wandered off without actively deciding to do so; people who are lost or have come to harm; those who have inadvertently failed to communicate their whereabouts and children who have become lost to other family members as a result of parental separation.

At the furthest end are those who are missing because they have been *forced* to leave or have been separated by others, for example victims of crime or children abducted by one of their parents. Here, the break in contact is unintentional on the part of the missing person but is the result of a deliberate action by a third party.

Between the intentionally and the unintentionally missing, those who *drift* out of contact in circumstances where the loss of contact was less purposeful can be situated. Here, the break between family members does not appear to have been explicitly chosen, but neither is it necessarily beyond the control of either the person reported missing, the caller who reports them, or both. This group might include people who lose contact after moving away or as a result of a transient lifestyle, moving between hostels and sleeping rough.

Some situations are particularly complex. Young runaways escaping abuse or women fleeing domestic violence may have made their own decision to leave, but in a real sense they may have felt that they had little choice. At one and the same time they have made a choice, but in circumstances of constraint

where they may perceive few or no other avenues of escape.

At any point on this continuum people may be considered missing by others, irrespective of whether they consider themselves to be missing. They may be reported missing by friends or relatives or by concerned health or welfare professionals. Equally, a person may disappear into uncertain and perhaps risky circumstances with no one reporting them missing, for example where a young person becomes homeless after being thrown out by parents or runs away to escape abuse.

### The scale of the problem

There are no national figures on missing persons in the UK. Although local police forces collect their own statistics on this issue, these are not collated nationally. Recent estimates of the number of missing persons reports made to the police in the UK each year range from 100,000–250,000 (Compass Partnership, 2000). In the year 1999/2000, the Greater London Metropolitan Police area alone received 27,570 reports of missing persons. The incidence of missing persons reports appears to be higher in urban areas: a Home Office study showed that in 1997 annual reports ranged from 2.5 per thousand of resident population in Cambridgeshire to 4.3 per thousand in the Greater London area and in Greater Manchester. Across these three police authorities, the average number of reports per day varied from 4.8 to 88.5 (Newiss, 1999).

Although it is a national agency, the Police National Missing Persons Bureau (PNMPB) is not in a position to provide a national figure on the prevalence of going missing. The PNMPB houses all outstanding (for more than 14 days) missing person reports and functions as a central clearing house of information on vulnerable missing person reports for all forces in the UK and for overseas agencies.

However, since the function of the PNMPB is to assist in the identification of people currently missing, the information held on its computer provides only a snapshot at a single point in time and cannot be used to establish prevalence. In addition, its information only relates to one segment of the missing persons population: those missing for more than two weeks.

Even if national figures on the number of missing persons reports to the police were available, these would not necessarily provide an accurate account of the number of people who go missing. On the one hand, police figures refer to *incidents* reported, but since some people may go missing on more than one occasion during a single year, this cannot tell us how many *individuals* go missing. On the other hand, as some studies have suggested, not all people who go missing are reported to the police (Rogers, 1991; Verhoeven et al, 2000). This may be due to reluctance on the part of families or friends to approach the police, or due to the reluctance of police forces to accept certain types of missing person reports due to local policies and procedures (Newiss, 1999).

In contrast, more is known about the extent of running away by children and young people. In the UK, a survey of 13,000 young people estimated that one in nine young people (11%) in the UK run away from home, or are forced to leave, and stay away overnight before the age of 16 (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999). This suggests that around 77,000 *young people* under the age of 16 are likely to run away for the first time each year. However, since one in eight of the young people surveyed had run away more than three times, the study estimated that there were approximately 129,000 *incidents* of young people running away overnight each year.

It is also known that young people who go missing from substitute care, and in particular from residential care, account for a disproportionate number of missing persons reports to the police (Abrahams and Mungall, 1992). There is also evidence that young people with past or current experience of being in care are more likely to run away than their peers, even though they only account for a very small proportion of overall running away (Rees, 1993; Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999; Wade, 2002).

## Research on missing people

The research literature on adults who go missing is sparse. Those who have addressed the issue have, variously, sought to map the characteristics of missing people, have considered the question of how going missing should be defined, or have constructed typologies of missing persons.

The small number of studies that have addressed the issue of adult missing persons have been principally based on analysis of police statistics (Hirschel and Lab, 1988; Henderson et al, 2000; Verhoeven et al, 2000). All of these studies raise the conceptual complexities of defining 'missing' and the lack of research attention paid to the issue of missing adults. An analysis of missing persons reports to the police in a large city in the US and a study of missing people reported to the Australian police, compared patterns for adults and under 18 year olds. They found that adults who went missing were more likely to have mental health problems or a disability, but were less likely to have gone missing on a previous occasion (Hirschel and Lab, 1988; Henderson et al, 2000). The American study also found that missing adults were more likely to have a drug or alcohol problem (19% of reports) than younger runaways (4%). Both studies found that, while the majority of missing people of all ages had returned or been found within one week, adults were significantly more likely to stay away longer. For example, in the American city, 24% of adults were missing for one week or more compared to 16% of under 18 year olds (Hirschel and Lab, 1988).

Some studies have gathered additional information from the families of missing people or from agencies working with these families in an attempt to understand missing people's circumstances and motivations. The issue of whether or not people have gone missing intentionally underpins various attempts to construct typologies of going missing. For example, the Australian study previously cited classified family and friends' accounts of reasons for going missing as: a desire for independence/rebellion (presumably referring to young people; over two thirds reported missing there were under 18); to escape adverse consequences, such as threats of violence or financial difficulties; as unintentional, due to dementia or miscommunication or for reasons which would raise concerns about their safety, such as suicide, accidents or abduction (Henderson et al,

2000). The typology developed by Payne (1995), which draws on the findings of American studies of runaways, consists of five categories. He classifies missing people as: runaways; throwaways (rejected missing people); pushaways (people forced to go missing); fallaways (people who have lost contact); and takeaways (people who are forced out of contact). However, the distinctions made in this typology are based on a review of research solely on young people. Some studies have also attempted to classify going missing with reference to age (Lamplugh, 1992; Payne, 1995).

Verhoeven et al (2000) distinguish between four groups of people who go missing in relation to the presumed reason for their disappearance. First, there are those who go missing involuntarily, but as the result of the deliberate act of another person, for example due to parental or stranger abduction, sexual trafficking, joining a cult, or because they are the victim of a crime. Second, there are those who go missing deliberately, for example young runaways, adults who leave to start a new life or people who leave with the purpose of committing suicide. Third, they refer to people who go missing unintentionally, including those suffering from amnesia, dementia or those who have got lost, hurt or have unintentionally failed to communicate their whereabouts. Finally, they identify a vulnerable group who may be at risk of going missing, including the homeless, ex-prisoners, ex-psychiatric patients, and drug or alcohol abusers.

Studies of missing persons often consider police responses to the issue. For example, in the UK the extensive volume of reports to the police, together with the sensitive nature of missing persons investigations, prompted the Home Office to commission a study of police policy and practice in relation to all missing persons (Newiss, 1999). An account of the attempts of the German police to match information on unidentified bodies with missing persons reports highlighted the importance of following up missing persons reports without delay, noting that the longer missing persons enquiries go on, the less likely they are to be successfully concluded (Keil, 1984). Another report, on German police procedures when searching for missing persons suffering from Alzheimer's disease, argued that the success of the search depended on a number of factors: the nature of the disappearance,

the amount of information available and the cooperation of the local community. It claimed that diligent pursuit of missing persons enquiries generally led to a successful resolution of these cases (Schroder, 2000).

Far more research has been undertaken in respect of children and young people who run away. There is extensive literature on young runaways, which will not be rehearsed in detail here. Earlier studies, undertaken between the 1950s and the 1960s in both the UK and the US, tended to focus on the individual characteristics of runaways and attempted to identify an individual pathology associated with running away (Tsunts, 1966; Shellow et al, 1967). During the 1970s, attention shifted to the effects of the environment on runaway behaviour. Attention turned to the family backgrounds of runaways from home and to the institutional environments of absconders from residential institutions (Clarke and Martin, 1971; Sinclair and Clarke, 1973; Brennan et al, 1978; Millham et al, 1978; Simons and Whitbeck, 1991).

Recent studies in the UK have been concerned with identifying the prevalence of going missing, understanding more about what motivates young people to be away from home, their experiences while they are away (including the risks they face) and in highlighting service needs (Abrahams and Mungall, 1992; Rees, 1993; Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999; Raws, 2001; Wade, 2002). A nationwide survey in the UK of young people running away found that, although the majority reported that they had run away, almost one fifth said that they had been forced to leave home (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999). While some runaways leave home for peer-centred reasons, the majority of runaway episodes are rooted in family difficulties. These include serious conflict with a parent or stepparent, neglect and rejection (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999). The high incidence of physical and sexual abuse among young runaways has also been highlighted in the literature, although they were less commonly reported in this study (Johnson and Carter, 1980; Farber et al, 1984; Janus et al, 1987; Stiffman, 1989; Cohen et al, 1991; Widom and Ames, 1994).

Several studies have identified the disproportionate number of incidents involving young people missing

from care placements and, in particular, from residential care. One study identified distinctive motivations and patterns among different groups of young people who went missing from care placements. It also explored the relative effects of their personal biographies and the environments in which they were placed on their running away behaviour (Wade and Biehal, 1998; Biehal and Wade, 2000).

The other main body of research in respect of children and young people who go missing concerns the issue of parental child abduction. Research on parental child abduction tends to focus on the motivations of the abductor and the circumstances preceding the abduction. It has attempted to identify risk factors for family abduction (Hegar and Greif, 1991; Plass et al, 1997; Johnston and Girdner, 1998) with a view to reducing the numbers of children going missing as a result of abduction.

## The study

This exploratory study addresses the gaps in the research on missing people through an analysis of data on the population of missing people reported to the NMPH charity. The charity offers support to the families of missing people, and also traces missing people and attempts to reunite them with their families, if they so wish (see Appendix A). It offers a variety of services, including:

- *The National Missing Persons Helpline* (NMPH): a national 24-hour helpline providing support, assistance and practical advice to families of missing persons.
- *The Message Home Helpline*: a national 24-hour helpline for those who have left home or who have run away to send a message home and/or obtain confidential help and advice. This service tends to be used primarily by young people who are away from home (see Mitchell, 2003).

The study was not able to address the question of prevalence, since reports to the NMPH are not necessarily representative of all people reported missing to the police. The main study had three principal components:

- Analysis of the main database of the NMPH.
- Analysis of a stratified random sample of the NMPH's paper case files.
- A postal survey of missing people who had recently been traced.

These three components drew on three overlapping samples, as follows.

### **The database sample**

First, a sample of cases was drawn from the main database of the NMPH to provide an overview of the characteristics of the missing persons population reported to the charity. This comprised all cases that were opened and all cases that were closed during a one-year period. This generated a total sample of 1,915 cases and, since many cases are opened and closed within a short period, this meant that 1,611 new cases and 1,279 closed cases were available for analysis.

### **The case file sample**

Second, a stratified random sample of 387 cases was drawn from this large sample. The database sample was stratified by age and ethnic origin. Within these strata, the *case file sample* was randomly selected in order to ensure a good spread of cases and an analysis was undertaken of the paper case files kept by the charity on this group of people. This permitted a more detailed analysis of the characteristics of this population, ascribed reasons for going missing, patterns of being away and return. The sample of people from minority ethnic groups was boosted in order to provide greater insight into their experiences.

### **The follow-up sample**

Third, a follow-up postal survey was carried out with all those in the database sample who had been found and were still traceable ( $n=367$ ). Responses were received from 114 people; of these, 74 last went missing as adults and 40 were young people under the age of 18 when they went missing.

Statistical data were analysed using non-parametric tests. Significant relationships referred to in this report are statistically significant at a 99% level of confidence ( $p<.01$ ) unless otherwise stated. A more

complete discussion of the design and methodology of this study is provided in Appendix B.

### ***Interpreting the missing issue***

The authors are aware that a study of people who go missing, or become otherwise separated from their families at different ages and in a wide range of circumstances, raises the problem of agglomerating different social problems within a single unifying framework. People of different ages, who go missing in different circumstances, may encounter different levels of risk and require very different responses. Some situations might raise problems of child or adult welfare, where the missing person might be seen to be in some way vulnerable or at risk. In other circumstances, people might freely choose to go missing without any apparent risk to themselves, even though this may be distressing to those they leave behind. Others have also questioned the usefulness of agglomerating different child welfare and criminal justice problems under the rubric of 'missing children' to include runaways, 'throwaways', parental and stranger abductions (Finkelhor et al, 1996).

A study that considers the variety of situations in which children, young people and adults go missing must take even greater care. The authors have tried to address this problem in two ways. First, in much of this report those who went missing under the age of 18 and adults who go missing are discussed separately, since the circumstances in which children and young people go missing and those in which adults go missing differ in fundamental ways. Second, within this child/adult division, the different circumstances in which people go/become missing and the implications of these for differences in patterns of outcome are examined.

Throughout this report steps have been taken to maintain the confidentiality and anonymity of the individuals in the study. Where particular individuals' experiences or accounts are recounted, names have been changed and details have sometimes been adjusted to protect anonymity.

# The characteristics of missing people

Each year, the NMPH receives nearly 10,000 missing persons reports. During the year of the study, 1,611 reports became cases actively worked on by the NMPH. An analysis of these cases provides a profile of the population reported to the agency.

Many of these people are also likely to be reported missing to the police. However, the population reported to the NMPH is likely to be more diverse as it also includes people who have gradually become separated or drifted out of contact over a lengthy period of time. Nevertheless, as will become apparent in later chapters, the circumstances in which this group lose contact with relatives may be as painful or as troubled as the circumstances of people whose missing episode is a discrete event involving a sudden departure.

The analysis of cases recorded on the NMPH's main database can provide a profile of the demographic characteristics of a large number of missing people and some information on those who report them missing. However, while the database provides information on key characteristics of the population reported to the NMPH, it lacks detail on the circumstances of missing people. This information is therefore complemented by the analysis of data collected in a follow-up survey of formerly missing people, which provided additional information.

The follow-up survey represents the first attempt to enable missing persons to provide their own accounts of going missing. These accounts provide valuable indicators of the circumstances, motivations and experiences of people who go missing. A comparison of the patterns of age, gender and ethnic origin across the follow-up and database samples

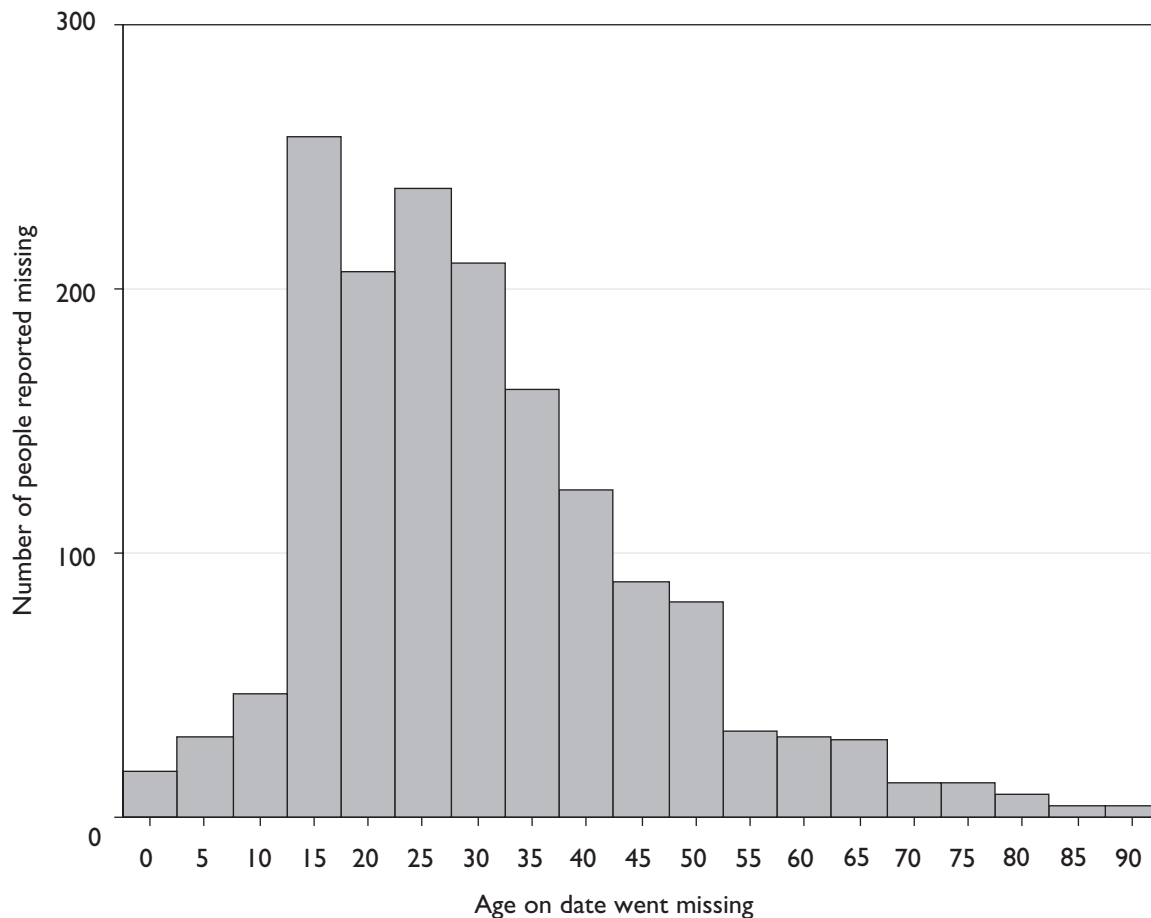
reveals some broad consistencies, a detailed description of which is provided in Appendix B. These similarities suggest that other characteristics identified in the follow-up sample (for which insufficient data were available in the database sample) may be generalisable to the wider population reported to the NMPH each year.

## The age at which people went missing

Overall, from the analysis of 1,611 newly opened cases, the likelihood of being reported missing appears to decrease with age, as Figure 2 illustrates. The age at which people went missing ranged from children under the age of one to adults over the age of 90.

People who had gone missing between the ages of 13 and 17 years were reported at a higher rate than people in any other age group. Numbers reported missing start to rise sharply from the age of 13, peaking at 15 years and then declining. The rise in numbers reported missing at the age of 13 is partly explained by other studies of young runaways, which have found that 13 years is the mean age at which young people first go missing (Rees, 1993; Graham and Bowling, 1995; Wade and Biehal, 1998).

Among adults, those aged 24–30 years were the most likely to be reported missing, followed by adults aged 18–23 years old. After the age of 30, the number of people reported missing in each age group decreases gradually.

**Figure 2: The ages at which people went missing (n=1,599)**

The age profile of missing persons reported to the NMPH is different to that of the population reported to the police. Missing persons reports to the police include a far higher proportion of children and young people. For example, 77% of reports to Greater Manchester Police in 2000 concerned under 18 year olds, as did 64% of reports to the Metropolitan Police Missing Persons Bureau in 1999/2000, whereas in this study just 22% were under 18 when they went missing. This difference in the populations reported to the police and NMPH reflects the different roles of these two agencies. The difference is also due to the fact that the data for this study is based on *individuals*, whereas police reports refer to *incidents*. As some young runaways, particularly those in residential care, are known to run away repeatedly, this will inflate police figures for under 18 year olds (Abrahams and Mungall, 1992; Wade and Biehal, 1998). The numbers and proportions of different age groups reported missing to the NMPH are provided in Table 1.

Although the proportion of young people under 18 is lower than that in police missing reports, the number of young people reported missing is nevertheless considerable. Among this age group there appears to be an identifiable subgroup of people reported to the NMPH because their families had lost contact with them years previously. The reasons for this loss of contact are discussed in Chapter Three. More than one in ten of those under 18 had last been seen between the 1930s and 1980s. This long-term loss of contact was particularly apparent among those reported to have gone missing when they were young children: 78% of those under five and 70% of those under 10 had been missing for five years or more. In contrast, the majority (83%) of the 258 young people who had gone missing between the ages of 13 and 17 years had done so within the sample period or in the six months preceding it. This group is therefore likely to be similar to the 13-17 year olds reported missing to the police.

**Table 1: The age and numbers of people reported missing**

Age group	Number of people	%
Under 13	94	6
13-17	258	16
18-23	241	15
24-30	346	22
31-40	312	20
41-50	184	11
51-60	81	5
61-70	49	3
71-80	23	1
Over 80	11	1
Total	1,599	100

Studies in other countries based on missing persons reports to the police also suggest that young people are more likely to be reported missing. A national study in the Netherlands indicates that 45% of missing persons reports concern 10–20 year olds, while an Australian study suggests that 67% of missing persons are aged 10–17, even once those missing from institutions are excluded (Henderson et al, 2000; Verhoeven et al, 2000). Similarly, a one-year study of all missing persons reports in a city in the US found that 57% referred to young people aged 13–17 years (Hirschel and Lab, 1988).

## Gender patterns

Of those reported to the NMPH during the year, 63% were male and 37% were female, but this overall pattern masks considerable age-related differences, as shown in Table 2.

Among adults aged 24 years and over, men were more likely to be reported missing than women, as 73% of the reports concerned males. In contrast, for young people between the ages of 13 and 17 years, girls were more likely to be reported missing than boys: 72% of those reported missing were female. The difference in the proportion of males and females is negligible for those under the age of 13 years.

These findings are consistent with police figures for missing people. Figures from both the Greater Manchester and the Metropolitan police forces also

**Table 2: Gender distribution within age group**

Age group	%		Number of people
	Male	Female	
Under 13	53	47	94
13-17	28	72	258
18-23	63	37	241
24-30	72	28	346
31-40	72	28	312
41-50	75	25	184
51-60	79	21	81
61-70	69	31	49
71-80	74	26	23
Over 80	82	18	11
Total	63	37	1,599

show that males are in the majority among adult missing persons. Greater Manchester Police statistics for 2000 have shown a far higher number of reports for missing female teenagers (63%) compared to males, while figures for the Metropolitan Police for 1999/2000 indicate that 56% of reported incidents of 14–17 year olds going missing involve females. Similarly, studies of young people who go missing have found that a higher proportion of young runaways are female (Rees, 1993; Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999). As for adults, data collected by the PNMPB on people missing for more than 14 days show that adult missing people are almost twice as likely to be male. A study of missing people in Australia identified similar gender patterns for both teenagers and adult missing people (Henderson and Henderson, 1998).

## Ethnic origin

The majority (86%) of those reported to the NMPH were white. Seven per cent were from black communities (African-Caribbean or African background), 5% were of Asian origin (from the Indian sub-continent) and 1% were of mixed ethnic origin. However, reports to Greater Manchester Police in 2000 suggest that a lower proportion of people from ethnic minorities may be reported missing to the police: 3% concerned people who were black and 2.5% concerned people of Asian origin.



Figures in the study also seem high when compared with national statistics on ethnic origin. These suggest that people from minority ethnic backgrounds constitute just 7.1% of the total population of England and Wales. Within this, the black population is estimated at 2.4% and the Asian population at 3.5% (Scott et al, 2001). One possible explanation for this over-representation in the sample may be the disproportionate number of referrals to the NMPH that are made from the Greater London area, where there is a higher concentration of people from minority ethnic communities.

In the sample of missing people reported to the NMPH, there were significant differences in the age that people were reported according to their ethnic origin. Table 3 shows the percentage of reports for people of different ages within their ethnic group.

Black people and people of Asian origin tended to go missing at a younger age than white people. Over half (57%) of the people of Asian origin who were reported to the NMPH had gone missing before the age of 24 years, compared to 44% of black people and only 34% of white people.

People from minority ethnic groups were significantly more likely to go missing as teenagers than white people. Only a very small number (23) of people of mixed ethnic origin went missing, but over

half of them left between the ages of 13 and 17 years, as did a quarter of people of Asian origin and a quarter of black people. In contrast, just 14% of white people were in this age group when they went missing.

A significant relationship between gender and ethnic origin was evident among those who went missing between the ages of 18 and 23 years. Women of Asian origin were significantly more likely to go missing between the ages of 18 and 23 years than women from other ethnic groups. Among 18-23 year olds of Asian origin, 79% were female, compared to just 34% of white people and 42% of black people in this age range.

### Health and disability

The follow-up survey suggests that many people who go missing suffer from poor health or have a disability. Among the 97 people who responded to the questions on health and disability, two fifths (39%) reported having a disability or health problem. This is similar to findings on special needs among missing people in Australia (Henderson et al, 2000).

Small numbers reported a physical (3%) or learning disability (8%) or a sensory impairment (5%). A similar proportion was found in the North American study cited, which found that 14% had 'physical or mental handicaps' (Hirschel and Lab, 1988).

Mental health problems were also present for a sizeable minority. Over one fifth (22%) reported depression and around one in twelve (9%) reported having other mental health problems.

Those who reported suffering from depression had been missing for a shorter period of time [ $p=.01$ ]. They were also more likely to be experiencing multiple difficulties at the time they went missing. Over two fifths (43%) reported three or more areas of difficulty compared to 16% of those who did not report depression. Illness, problems with drugs or alcohol and being threatened by someone [ $p=.01$ ] were areas of difficulty significantly associated with the reporting of depression. This is consistent with the pattern for the case file sample, discussed in Chapter Three, among whom those who went

**Table 3: Comparison of age distribution within ethnic groups**

Age group	% of ethnic group			
	Asian (n=69)	Black (n=106)	White (n=1,309)	Other* (n=38)
Under 13	3	8	5	21
13-17	26	25	14	40
18-23	28	11	15	8
24-30	18	22	22	11
31-40	15	21	20	13
41-50	9	2	13	3
51-60	1	5	6	
61-70	1	5	3	5
71-80		3	2	
Over 80			1	

\*Other includes people of mixed ethnic origin, Chinese and any other ethnic origin consistent with the classifications used by the Department of Health.

missing due to an accumulation of problems often suffered from depression.

## Residence of person prior to going missing

There was little information on the main database that documented the circumstances of people prior to going missing, and in most cases it was difficult to identify where people had gone missing from or with whom they had been living before they disappeared. However, the follow-up survey did provide some indication of this.

As might be expected, those under 18 were more likely to be living with parents at the time they went missing. However, this was also the case for a substantial minority of adults (see Table 4).

A number of those reported to the NMPH had gone missing from institutions. A minority (4%) of cases on the main database were reported missing by care professionals. Many of these people were known to have gone missing from children’s homes, foster homes, mental health institutions, hospitals or from care homes for people with learning difficulties or elderly people. People over the age of 55 years were more likely to be reported by care professionals than those in other age groups. However, although 8% of people over the age of 55 years were reported missing by care professionals, it was unclear whether all of them were missing from institutional care.

Young people in care only accounted for a small proportion of those reported missing, as in other studies of young people who run away (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999). Although young people missing from care placements are over-represented in reports of young runaways to the police, almost all (93%) of the children and young people reported to the NMPH appeared to be missing from home rather than from care placements.

## Employment status and income

The follow-up survey indicated that many missing people were experiencing difficulties with employment. Over one third of adults had been out of work or unable to work for health reasons immediately prior to going missing and only half were participating in some form of education or employment, as shown in Table 5. Around one in twelve were caring for children or adult relatives, or were retired.

As might be expected from their occupational status, nearly a third (32%) relied on unemployment, sickness or disability benefits, whereas only slightly more than two fifths (42%) supported themselves through their wages. Small numbers were in receipt of an education grant or student loan (5%), a pension (5%) or were financially dependent on their partner (9%) or their parents (3%).

**Table 4: Residence of person prior to going missing**

Residence	%	
	under 18 (n=37)	18 and over (n=64)
Living with a partner	3	39
Living with a parent	81	23
Living alone	3	27
Living with friends	3	6
Residential care (including children’s home, nursing home)	3	1
Other (including other relatives)	8	3

**Table 5: Employment status of adults in follow-up sample**

Employment status	% of adults (n=65)
Education	9
Employed	42
Not working due to ill health/disability	11
Unemployed	23
Caring for child or relative	3
Retired	5
Other	8

## The number of times people had gone missing

Almost three quarters (72%) of adults in the follow-up sample reported that they had only been missing on one occasion, but almost one fifth (19%) had been missing three or more times. Those who had first gone missing at an earlier age had gone missing more often [t = .364]. Almost three quarters of repeat absentees first went missing between 13 and 17 years of age (73%) and almost one fifth (18%) between 18 and 23.

Over half (56%) of the young people had only gone missing on one occasion but, at the other extreme, nearly one third (32%) had gone missing more than three times. A recent UK nationwide survey of running away found that a similar proportion of young people had run away just once (54%), but that only 15% of those who had run away overnight had done so more than three times (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999). The numbers of young people that have gone missing repeatedly therefore appear high.

## Reporter of the missing incident

Parents were the most likely to report missing people to the NMPH, partly, perhaps, due to the high proportion of children, teenagers and young adults in the sample. Over two fifths were reported by parents and one fifth by siblings. Perhaps surprisingly, fewer than one in ten people were reported missing by their partners.

## Summary

As has been shown, missing people are a diverse group. People of any age may go missing, from very young children to people in their nineties. Those aged between 13 and 17 years were reported at a higher rate than people in any other age groups. Among adults, 24–30 year olds were the most likely to be reported to the NMPH. After the age of 30, the number of people reported missing decreases gradually as age increases.

Adult men are reported missing far more frequently than adult women, whereas young people reported missing are far more likely to be female. Those most likely to be reported missing are girls aged 13–17 and men aged 24–30.

People of different ethnic origins were reported missing to the NMPH. The majority (86%) were white, 7% were from black communities, 5% were of Asian origin (from the Indian sub-continent) and 1% were of mixed ethnic origin. Black people and people of Asian origin tended to go missing at a younger age than white people. Women of Asian origin were far more likely to go missing between the ages of 18 and 23 years than women from other ethnic groups.

Many people (39%) who go missing report suffering from poor physical health or have a disability. Mental health problems were also present for a sizeable minority.

In Chapter Three, the characteristics of people reported missing are considered, together with the reasons they are reported.

# 3

## Reasons for being missing

The circumstances that may lead adults or children to become missing people are often complex and multi-layered. As shown in Chapter One, the missing phenomenon is best understood as a continuum in which a break in contact may be either intentional or unintentional. Some people make a conscious decision to leave, albeit often not in circumstances of their own choosing, while others may drift apart from family members over time. Some may never have intended to be missing, and indeed may not conceptualise their experience in these terms, while others may be forced apart through the actions of others. This chapter considers the reasons that adults and children go missing, or come to be considered missing by others, and this discussion is situated in the context of the missing continuum.

Analysis of information taken from the case files provides an overview of the reasons for which people were reported missing. This includes 294 people

who were last reported missing as adults and a further 93 who had last been missing before the age of 18. Additional information is drawn from the follow-up sample of 74 adults and 40 young people. The discussion will therefore incorporate both the perspectives of callers, usually family members, and those of missing persons themselves. Adults and young people are considered separately, since the circumstances that give rise to being missing and the implications of doing so are often significantly different.

### Adults' reasons for being missing

The range of reasons for adults being missing is presented in Table 6. This indicates the percentage of the case file sample that was missing according to the four main categories of the missing continuum.

**Table 6: Adults' reasons for being missing (n=294)**

Decided	64%	Relationship breakdown (including marriage breakdown, when a parent leaves home and conflict between parents and their adult children) Escape from multiple problems, financial difficulties, violence or arrest To commit suicide Linked to mental health
Drifted	19%	Lost contact (after moving away or migration abroad) Transient lifestyle (linked to drug, alcohol or mental health problems)
Unintentional	16%	Dementia Linked to mental health problems Accident/harm Miscommunication
Forced	1%	Victim of a crime Forced apart by others

Almost two thirds of adults in the case file sample had gone missing intentionally; they had decided to leave. However, as can be seen in the table, the reasons that led them to do so varied considerably. Around one in five had drifted apart from family members, either through moving away or the adoption of a transient lifestyle. Around one in six had not intended to be missing at all and only a very small minority of adults had been forced apart from other family members. Each of these categories of absence will be considered in turn.

### **Decided to leave**

Among adults who decided to leave, those who were missing as a result of relationship breakdown within the family accounted for almost one third (30%) of all adults in the case file sample. Across all ages, the most common reason underlying a deliberate break in contact by adult missing persons was the breakdown of relationships between parents and adult children, between siblings or between partners.

Gender was not a factor in this, as men and women were equally likely to go missing as a result of relationship breakdown. The range of factors that prompted going missing was also broadly consistent across all ethnic groups. In some instances, it was clear that a particular conflict had precipitated the missing episode, with some people described as leaving after an argument, but this is likely to have been the 'last straw' in the longer-term process of relationship breakdown. In a number of cases there was evidence of underlying family problems or conflicts that had persisted for some time.

### **Relationship breakdown within the family**

Breakdown in marital relationships figured in fewer cases than might have been expected, perhaps because it is common and therefore socially acceptable for marriages to breakdown and for one partner to leave openly. However, where it did result in a missing episode, it could leave the partner left behind feeling bewildered. Several partners reported that they had not anticipated their partner leaving and could think of no reason for them to do so. In some instances, this may reflect an inability to accept the ending of a relationship. For example, one woman said, when

traced, that her partner knew she had left him and knew where she was.

Marriage breakdown often led to the disruption of other relationships and, in particular, to the subsequent loss of contact between the parent who left and their children<sup>1</sup>. In some cases, parents had apparently chosen to go missing from the child's life, perhaps as a way of avoiding all contact with their former partners or to start a new life:

"If I contacted the children my ex-wife would cause trouble and try to find out where I was living, so I wouldn't have any peace." (Neil, missing eight years, from age 37)

Often the (now adult) child's attempt to find a parent appears to have been prompted by recent events, such as bereavement. For others, it was the need to understand more about their past that led them to contact the NMPH. For example, one woman felt the need to contact her mother to find out why she had left her behind, together with her siblings, when she had left a violent marriage and had not kept in touch.

Some parents, all male, felt they had been prevented from maintaining contact with their children, usually after an irreconcilable breakdown in relationships with their partners:

"I was told my ex-wife had a baby boy. I went to the hospital but the nurses told me she didn't want to have anything more to do with me and I wasn't to have anything to do with my son." (Arthur, out of contact with son for 38 years, from age 27)

"It is hard for me to explain my reasons for leaving my wife.... Everything just got on top of me and I left. I did not want to leave my own children. I wish I could have taken them with me, but it was impossible." (Ian, out of contact for 12 years, from age 38)

How far the refusal of access was resisted is unclear. In Ian's case, his wife's attempts to prevent access became compounded by his own lack of persistence, arising out of ill health, the loss of a job and a rising tide of hopelessness. These were complex situations and it is known that many fathers feel demoralised

about their role in the family once they separate from their partners (Flouri and Buchanan, 2001).

Some cases revolved around a breakdown in parent and adult child relationships. Even when callers considered that they had just drifted apart, a more problematic history often lay beneath the surface. Some parents refused further contact once they had been traced. In some instances, they had started new lives without space for their children, in others they did not want to renew relationships that had proved difficult in the past. Parents and children sometimes had contrasting views of the situation. Parents could find an adult child's disappearance incomprehensible. One thought his son was being held against his will, while another thought her daughter was suffering from postnatal depression. Yet, when traced, both were clear that they had gone missing deliberately to escape parents they thought 'manipulative'.

Conflicts and tensions arising from the transition to adulthood provoked a breakdown in parent/child relationships for some young adults in their late teens to mid-twenties. A number related going missing to communication problems and arguments about greater autonomy:

"My parents had difficulty in accepting the fact that I was an adult, they found it impossible to accept that I was sexually active. My mum and I had a complete breakdown in communication. We shouted all the time and at times came to blows. This caused me to feel unwanted and, at times, that I would be better dead, so I left in order to gain space and to prove that they could not control me and that I was an adult who needed to learn from my mistakes and be allowed to be me." (Sally, 18, missing three weeks)

Conflicts over autonomy were a particular feature for some young adults with learning disabilities. Three completed follow-up questionnaires and all complained of their parents' failure to accept them as adults:

"Acceptance from my family that I had grown up and could make my own decisions and was the right age to move out." (Patrick, missing six years, from age 21)

The transition from single to married status was also a source of conflict for some young adults aged 18–

30 in the case file sample. These young people had disappeared following conflict with their parents over a choice of partner. All but one was female and most of these young women were of Asian origin. For some young women of Asian origin these conflicts appeared to intersect with specific cultural expectations regarding entering into, or remaining in, a marriage. Some had gone missing to avoid being coerced into marriage and a few were escaping the threat of violence from relatives attempting to enforce family decisions regarding marriage. Other recent research on young people has also identified the issue of forced marriage or the violence that can be associated with it as a factor in running away for young Asian females (Britton et al, 2002).

Four people in the follow-up sample had gone missing due to conflict over a choice of partner, two of these were male, but this conflict also appeared to be part of a broader set of difficulties in family relationships:

"My father (who was a violent bully) disapproved of the girl I wanted to marry and I had to make a choice between her and my family. I chose the girl and we cut ourselves off from my family. We are still happily married after over 30 years." (Samuel, missing 30 years, from age 26)

Finally, and common across all age groups, some missing episodes were sparked by a breakdown in relationships between siblings. These were often the result of long-standing family conflicts, leading one sibling to move away. In other circumstances, the breakdown of a marriage could also lead to a loss of sibling contact. This phenomenon of the rupture in one relationship leading to a breaking of links with the entire birth family was not uncommon, irrespective of whether all had been involved with the conflict. In this sense, a breakdown in relationships with a partner, parent, child or sibling often led to a desire for a fresh start and, perhaps, is indicative of the serious and often long-term difficulties that can underpin a missing incident.

### Escape

One in twelve of the case file sample (8%) used going missing to escape the acute emotional stress arising from a convergence of multiple problems. An accumulation of problems could bring people, most

often men, to a crisis point where they would suddenly leave home and disappear without trace. These might include relationship difficulties, health or mental health problems for the missing person or their partner, difficulties with work or finances or problems with alcohol:

**“I generally felt everything was getting on top of me. My job was extremely stressful and therefore put stress on my home life and I just felt I had to get away.” (Mary, 59, missing for a few days)**

Accounts provided in the follow-up questionnaires suggest that while there is often a gradual accumulation of problems, it is the onset of a particular crisis, such as the ending of a relationship, loss of a job or a financial crisis, which prompts a missing incident. However, in other cases, the attrition of living with long-term problems finally led to a desire to escape. Evidence for this included the effects of undisclosed childhood abuse, long-term family stress or midlife crisis:

**“I felt that I was ‘missing out’ and that life was ‘passing me by’. My wife was wrapped up in her managerial job and my children were attending university. We were earning very good money and had no financial worries. I felt that everyone was ‘going forward’ and I was ‘standing still’ and I felt very resentful about my situation, also working within the confines of home, not working in an adult environment.” (Frank, 56, missing for three months)**

The disappearance was usually completely unexpected, although some went missing repeatedly as a strategy for dealing with stress: ‘he disappears when things get on top of him’. In some instances, difficulties with communication in families compounded feelings of stress. Unable to share their distress or use their families effectively as a source of support, escape appeared to be a preferable option.

Recent research has suggested that it is the accumulation of a number of stressors rather than a single stressful event that determines the level of stress experienced by individuals (McKenry and Price, 2000). The interaction of multiple stressors may therefore be more likely to provoke a sense of crisis than a single, isolated stressor. Stress in one area of life, for example arising from work or financial problems, may create or reinforce problems in

another area, such as family relationships. This clustering and mutual reinforcement of stressors may lead people to view their life crisis as irresolvable and so prompt them to seek to escape through going missing.

A small minority of adults in the case file sample (2%), mostly male and aged 30 or over, cited financial problems as the principal reason for going missing. However, in common with the previous cases, evidence of additional stressors was usually present, including marital difficulties, depression or alcohol misuse.

A minority (2%) who disappeared were fleeing violence. In these circumstances, a missing person fearing for their safety may feel obliged to break contact with their entire family network. In a few cases, the threat of violence was crime related. In others, it was connected to domestic violence. The accounts of women who had been traced graphically conveyed the sense of powerlessness and social isolation that can surround violence of this kind:

**“When being beaten I was afraid for my life. I tried to leave the man so many times but he always found me. It was his hometown and so he had other people watching me in case I got away. I did not know of any help I could get, and he always made sure I had no money.” (Zoe, out of contact with her mother for 22 years, from age 23)**

As Zoe’s circumstances suggest, women fleeing domestic violence often have little choice but to hide and, in doing this, to break all links with their parents, children or siblings.

Some disappearances (4% of adults) were related to involvement in crime and most were male. Although most of these disappearances represented attempts to avoid arrest or prosecution, this was not always the case. Some felt ashamed to face their families, while for others factors such as depression or relationship difficulties were also at play:

**“When I lost my job I was also prosecuted and convicted on a financial irregularity. I was ashamed to face the family ... [going missing gave me] independence – no family pressure on behaviour.” (Joseph, missing 31 years, from age 28)**

## Suicide and mental health

A number of adults in the case file sample (6%) disappeared to attempt or commit suicide and a further 5% went missing directly as a result of mental health problems. In the absence of a suicide note, it was not always clear that people had left to commit suicide. However, in a number of cases where a body was found suicide was considered the most likely explanation.

Three men who returned questionnaires related going missing to mental health issues. All were suffering from depression, were in extreme distress and felt a need to escape to think through their problems:

“... to get to terms with my feelings of depression and be able to look forward to the future.” (Edward, 41, missing one year)

“I have had time away from all other influences in which to think through my problems. This has enabled me to put things into perspective and to return home.” (Albert, 37, missing three days)

## Drifted

Almost one in five adults (19%) in the case file sample appeared to have drifted out of contact with relatives. A majority (12%) lost contact after moving away, either within the UK or abroad, and without leaving contact details subsequently became missing to their families. It was often difficult to elicit the causes for this loss of contact, to establish whether or not it was unintentional, even where the accounts of both the missing person and the caller were recorded on case files. Some callers described this loss of contact as purely accidental, with comments such as “I didn’t have her address” or “he’s not good at keeping in touch”. However, in other cases where relatives had drifted apart, it is possible that they had never been close and had little interest in staying in touch or, indeed, that losing touch masked a desire to break links.

In cases of drift, people often did not see themselves as missing in a real sense:

“I have never gone missing. I did not go away as such but moved house. My brother who traced me also moved a few times. He knew where I lived up to my last address.... At that time I had no idea where he was living, he did not let me know so we lost contact.” (Andrew, out of contact for 15 years, from age 43)

In such cases it is likely that family ties are already fractured or weak and become further eroded as time passes, so that one or other of the parties cease to maintain even occasional contact by post or telephone. This appears to have been an issue in the following case:

“My father and I lost contact with each other over a period of approximately 10 years. My father contacted you to help him track me down.... I don’t feel as if I have particularly lost out or gained anything by not being in contact. Our relationship was, and visits to each other were, sporadic.” (Jane, missing 10 years, from age 20)

A further 7% of adults in the case file sample drifted out of touch due to their transient lifestyles at the margins of society. Most of these were male and their unsettled lifestyle was associated with drug or alcohol misuse and/or mental health problems. The usual pattern was for people to drift between periods in hostels and sleeping rough. Some of them may have chosen to breakaway from their relatives, as it is likely that for some, long-term family problems may have been at the root of their current difficulties. However, whatever the nature of underlying family problems, if any, the unsettled lifestyle they were living led them to drift out of contact with concerned relatives, who regarded them as missing.

Questionnaires returned by seven people whose prolonged absences were linked to their lifestyles, provide insight into the ways in which people can come to find themselves: “... just homeless, drifting and on drugs” (James, missing for nine years from age 27). A majority had run away from home or care frequently as teenagers and all but one reported problems with drugs or alcohol. For some, running away and dependent drug use in earlier years had prevented a successful reintegration into family life:



“When I first ran away from home at 15 I became hooked on heroin. When I returned home as a drug addict it was very difficult to just fall into a routine family way of life.. I needed to go out shoplifting to pay for my habit. In the end, the tensions at home became too much so I left again.... The last time I left at 24, I had only been home a few months but I felt my mum still treated me as a 15 year old, the age I was when I first left home.” (Joanna, missing for five years, from age 24)

Most accounts given by these people spoke of rejection, depression and feelings of not fitting in. For example, one young man, who had spent much of his childhood in care, had never settled. He moved between children’s homes, ran away from most and eventually left care at 18 with minimal support. He tried to stay with various relatives but felt in the way and eventually became homeless. His past experiences of family rejection, his feelings of being unloved and unwanted, prompted him to drift from town to town over a period of 10 years.

These accounts also describe the path by which persistent running away in adolescence can lead to adult homelessness (Simons and Whitbeck, 1991; Kirby, 1994; Craig et al, 1996). In adulthood, the lifestyles associated with homelessness and drug or alcohol abuse can make it difficult to maintain contact with family networks, especially where the history of these relationships has been unhappy:

“I always felt that, because of my alcohol addiction, I didn’t want to disrupt anyone else’s lifestyle. That is why, in the end, I didn’t contact anyone. You could say I gave up on myself.” (Charlie, missing 13 years, from age 25)

Depression was mentioned in several cases as a contributory factor. For one ex-serviceman, divorce and retirement from the forces left him depressed and homeless, moving from hostel to hostel, out of contact with his family:

“I am ex Royal Navy. To some people I have gone missing several times. I did not realise that anyone had thought I had gone missing. The pain and the strain I suffered from the separation threw me out of kilter. My only thoughts were for my very young sons, my own welfare did not come into it. I am sorry that my thoughtlessness has caused such

sorrow.. A little understanding and rehabilitation may have helped.” (David, missing for 10 years, from age 51)

A common theme among this group was that their difficulties made them a burden to those around them and that it would be better for all concerned if they simply removed themselves: “I just thought the family would be better off without me around, so I just slipped out of the picture without telling anyone” (Luke, missing for 18 months, from age 18).

Although their transient lifestyles were the principal reason that most had drifted out of contact with their families, the picture was clearly more complex. Most had ‘slipped out of the picture’ because they felt that relationships with their families, already strained, were just too difficult to sustain, given the difficulties they were experiencing in their own lives.

### **Unintentional absence**

For around one in six adults (16%), their absence was likely to have been unintentional. A majority of these (10% of the sample) were elderly people and suffering from dementia. This was the most common reason for going missing ascribed to those aged 60 or over, was present in one third of the case files for this age group and appeared equally likely to affect all ethnic groups. Some elderly people with dementia became disoriented after being admitted to hospital or a residential institution and wandered off. Others living in the community left their homes and wandered away, or went out for a visit or some other purpose and failed to return.

In a small number of cases (2%), apparently unintentional absences were linked to mental health issues. As has been seen, people with mental health problems may go missing intentionally, unintentionally or may drift out of contact. However, these cases were considered to be the direct result of a person’s state of confusion and vulnerability. Most commonly these absences were linked to severe depression or, for some people with psychotic illnesses, a failure to take medication. Two questionnaire responses indicated that, at the time they were away, these people had not really been aware of what they were doing:

“I did not want to leave my home but I was slowly getting ill and did not realise quite what I was doing... My fears and anxiety when living there were indescribable once my partner died.” (Ailsa, missing for two years, from age 44)

While there were a few instances of a genuine miscommunication about a person’s whereabouts (2%), a small number of people (2%) were found to have suffered accidental deaths. For example, one man died in a car crash but was not identified for several days and some accidental deaths were linked to physical health problems, such as angina or diabetes.

### **Forced to leave**

Being forced apart from relatives appears to be a rare occurrence for adults but, as shall be seen, is more common among children and young people. Just (1%) of adults in the case file sample endured a forced separation. One male had been found murdered, another was seeking a twin from whom he had been separated at birth and a father had been denied access to his child by court order due to child protection concerns.

Before exploring the reasons that children and young people may become missing, it may be helpful to reflect on the patterns apparent in the data of going missing for adults.

### **Patterns of going missing: age, gender and risk**

As discussed, nearly two thirds (64%) of adults in the case file sample had made a deliberate choice to break contact. A further fifth (19%), almost all of them under the age of 60 years, had drifted out of contact. Around one in six (16%) went missing unintentionally, over half of whom were individuals aged 60 or over. Only three adults were forced to be missing, constituting just 1% of the sample.

Age is therefore associated with patterns of going missing intentionally, unintentionally or through drift. Adults in the 18–30 age range were significantly more likely to go missing deliberately than older adults. In contrast, older adults were far more likely to go missing unintentionally. This was the case for almost one half (48%) of those aged 60

or over, most commonly the result of dementia.

Those in middle adulthood were significantly more likely than others to drift out of contact. Over one third (35%) of those between the ages of 31 and 59 years drifted out of contact, more than double the proportion for 18–30 year olds.

Although, as shown in Chapter Two, people from minority ethnic communities were more likely to be reported missing at a younger age, among adults there were few identifiable differences across all ethnic groups in reasons for being missing. Patterns of going missing intentionally, unintentionally or through drift were broadly similar.

Gender differences in numbers reported missing might be linked to differences in coping with emotional distress. Evidence suggests that men are more likely to deploy problem-solving efforts or try to avoid a problem and display emotional self-control. Women, on the other hand, are more likely to deploy expressive strategies and seek support from others (Thoits, 1991). This may help in understanding why, in all adult age groups in the study, a far higher proportion of men were reported missing. Their problem-solving efforts may, as a last straw, have included escape as a problem-solving strategy, or they may have drifted out of contact as a means of avoiding the problems they faced.

Going missing may perhaps be seen as an adaptive strategy. People may draw on a range of coping strategies to help them manage chronic or acute stress, including self-controlling strategies, confronting problems, seeking social support, making problem-solving plans, making a positive reappraisal of the situation, *escape* and *distancing/avoidance* (Eckenrode, 1991). *Escape* may be a strategy adopted by those who intentionally go missing. *Distancing/avoidance* may be a strategy for some who drift out of contact. Where family ties are weak or family problems are not openly acknowledged, avoidance may be used as an adaptive strategy, so that emotional distance is conceptualised as a problem arising from physical distance and the passage of time.

As for the question of risk, an exploratory study such as this cannot generate precise indicators to predict in which circumstances or for which groups of people there will be a greater or lesser risk of going missing. However, the data does provide some helpful

pointers. In particular, adults may be at risk at certain points in their lives, at times of transition or of crisis, and certain groups of people with chronic difficulties may be more at risk.

Transitions are normal events that are a predictable part of everyday life, such as the birth or death of family members, entering higher education or employment, leaving home, marriage and retirement. However, if the family has difficulty in adapting to the changes that these transitions bring they can lead to crisis (McKenry and Price, 2000). In particular, the transition to adulthood can, for many young people, prove to be a stressful period, especially as this transition now tends to extend into the twenties (Banks et al, 1992; Jones, 1995). Tensions arising from extended youth transitions may help to account for the fact that, among adults, people between the ages of 18 and 30 were the most likely to be reported missing.

People were also prompted to go missing by other traumatic life transitions, such as the breakdown of a marriage, age-related health problems or bereavement. Marriage breakdown could either lead to a sudden disappearance or to a gradual loss of contact between parents and children. People making the transition from living in an institution to living in the community, such as those leaving care, the armed forces or prison, also experienced problems that sometimes led them to drift into a transient lifestyle.

In other cases, going missing was provoked by a particular crisis. This could arise from an acute breakdown in mental health, financial problems, work-related problems or the loss of a job, the threat

of violence or a convergence of multiple problems. A clustering of stressors appeared particularly likely to engender a sense of crisis. Such crises could cause severe emotional stress and prompt a desire to escape through going missing.

Certain groups of people with chronic difficulties also appear to be at risk of going missing. Some are vulnerable as a result of physical or mental health problems, such as older people suffering from dementia, people with severe depression and some who fail to take their medication. Young adults with learning difficulties may also be at risk, either intentionally due to conflicts over adult status or unintentionally. In addition, some people with mental health and/or drug or alcohol problems may be at risk of drift through a transient lifestyle.

## Children and young people's reasons for being missing

The variety of circumstances in which adults could become missing bore both similarities and differences to those for children and young people. The range of reasons provided for those in the case file sample last missing before the age of 18 is presented in Table 7.

### Decided to leave

As with adults, a majority of young people had made a decision to leave their homes. Over two thirds of those in the case file sample ( $n=93$ ) and of those in the follow-up sample ( $n=40$ ) had chosen to leave what were often quite difficult home circumstances.

**Table 7: Young people's reasons for being missing\***

Decided	70%	Ran away Relationship breakdown Linked to mental health problems To commit suicide
Drifted	4%	Lost contact (after moving away or migrating abroad)
Unintentional	10%	Following parental divorce or separation
Forced	8%	Parental abduction Thrown out of home

\* Column does not total 100% as in a small number of cases the reasons for being missing were unclear and could not be classified

Most had run away. However, a small group of older young people appeared to have made a more permanent decision to break links with their families, perhaps to start a fresh life as young adults. A small number of absences were linked to mental health problems or resulted in suicide.

### Young runaways

Around three in five of the young people in the case file sample (60%) had run away. Previous research has identified that as many as four in five of those who run away overnight under the age of 16, do so because of problems in the family home (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999). Although family difficulties were less commonly cited in this study, they still represented the most frequently given reason for running away and were also often an ingredient in incidents where other factors were at play.

Running away was most often rooted in conflict with a parent, stepparent or other family member. Although the contexts were varied, the length of these absences, the shortest being seven days, suggests that these were unlikely to have been isolated or trivial events, since a majority of runaways tend to stay away one night or less (Abrahams and Mungall, 1992; Rees, 1993; Wade and Biehal, 1998; Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999). Scenarios that prompted running away included conflict arising from school performance or attendance, from a discovered pregnancy, from perceived strict parenting and from expectations that young people would take undue responsibility in the home.

Parenting teenagers is a difficult task requiring some informal negotiation, flexibility and power sharing from parents (Coleman, 1997). Disputes over acceptable boundaries and forms of control prompted running away in a number of cases, including over a desire to stay out late or choice of boyfriend or girlfriend. In some instances, parental concern was understandable. In others, the legitimate fears of parents, taken to extreme, could be interpreted as abusive by young people. Elaine said that her mother disapproved of her friends to such an extent that she gave "... me no privacy. She opened my letters, read my diaries. She became my shadow. There were lots of arguments and aggressive

behaviour on a daily basis" (Elaine, 17, missing for 12 weeks).

Studies have found a high incidence of physical and sexual abuse among samples of runaways (Johnson and Carter, 1980; Farber et al, 1984; Janus et al, 1987; Stiffman, 1989; Cohen et al, 1991; Widom and Ames, 1994). In the UK, it is estimated that around one in four runaways leave as a result of physical, sexual or emotional abuse or neglect (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999). Reported incidents of abuse were lower for this sample, but almost one in twenty young people ran away in response to physical abuse and, for a similar proportion, past sexual abuse formed part of the underlying context to going missing. Some others had felt unwanted and rejected. One girl aged 13 "went away as I thought I was unwanted and nowhere was a steady place to go", and a boy, living with friends, said he "felt no one loved me and I had no family". In these circumstances, young people can feel profoundly isolated and unwanted. Lacking someone to confide in – "someone who would listen and understand my feelings" – running away may seem like the only realistic option.

Running away is more often a spontaneous reaction to hurt and frustration than a premeditated decision: "I hadn't planned to run away until the moment I left". It is also often a response to complex circumstances. Problems at home may become interwoven with difficulties in other spheres of young people's lives and culminate in a decision to run away:

"I was having problems at school as I had recently been expelled from school and had moved within two months to a new one. I had broken friends with many people and at the same time made new ones. I was having many problems at home. Not getting on with my parents and not speaking to them unless we were arguing. I had met a bloke also, who became my boyfriend and we got on very well, so I went to live with him at his flat before we moved into his parent's house." (Rachel, aged 15, missing for 14 weeks)

Running away could also be centred on personal issues for the young person. In some instances, young people ran away to seek adventure or to live with older men. However, for others, running away appeared to be a reaction to the accumulation of a

number of stresses expressed as feeling upset, anxious or depressed, and sometimes linked to traumatic past events such as the break up of their parents' relationship. For example, one boy said he "used to get a feeling inside [when he] got stressed, that made me want to run". Mental health difficulties were thought to be a central or background factor in the disappearances of seven young people, lasting from two to six days. Either they had been seriously depressed, had made previous suicide attempts or had self harmed.

For some young people, running away was linked to their offending behaviour. In a few cases, young people were attempting to avoid arrest but, more commonly, running away was linked to the fall out from their behaviour at home. Where offending was persistent or linked to staying out with peers, the cycle of tension created within families could become unbearable. For some young people a cycle of running away linked to disaffected behaviours – such as offending, substance misuse and school non-attendance – can become mutually reinforcing (Whitbeck and Simons, 1990; Graham and Bowling, 1995; Wade and Biehal, 1998; Wade, 2002).

Kirstie, aged 14, lived with her mother and a large number of siblings. She became involved with a peer group of older males, including her boyfriend, and stopped attending school. A cycle developed of staying out late linked to offending and use of drugs and alcohol. During the absence for which she was reported to the NMPH, she was picked up by the police with others for armed robbery and placed on probation. Although her life at home appeared to stabilise for a time, a similar pattern of going missing eventually resumed.

The role of peers strengthens during adolescence and can influence running away (Brennan et al, 1978). Although Kirstie's experience was extreme, the absences of around one in ten young people in the case file sample were ascribed to peer influences and all were female. Peer influence can take a number of forms. Young people may be enticed or coerced into running away with others. They may go missing to spend time with friends in a variety of circumstances or develop strong links with peers that lead to conflict with their parents (Wade, 2002).

Most commonly young people in the case file sample had either gone missing with one or more friends or to spend time with a friend. Others were considered to have fallen in with the 'wrong crowd' and been led astray. In one or two instances, running away derived from concerns about parental discovery of peer-related behaviour, such as visiting clubs and pubs. However, as has already been seen, the influence of peers can be just one element in a broader canvas of difficulty experienced by young people:

"I went away because I felt my parents didn't understand me and were too strict. I was also falling behind with my schoolwork. I had also fallen in with a bad crowd and it was my then boyfriend's idea to run away." (Joy, aged 15, missing for five weeks)

### Relationship breakdown

Some young people made a deliberate decision to leave their homes but did not appear to have run away. This type of absence accounted for around one in twenty of those in the case file sample. Reasons for leaving were not radically different to those of the runaways, although they are demarcated by age. All were aged 16 or 17 when they left home and there was evidence that, for the majority, the intention was to leave permanently. At the age they were, more options would have been available to make a permanent break from their families and establish independent lives for themselves as young adults. With the exception of one young person, who reconciled herself with her family after 18 months, all of those who were eventually traced had been missing a long time – ranging from 4 to 38 years. In addition, once they were traced, the majority wanted no further contact with their families. In cases where there was some renewed contact it either tended to be fragile, uncomfortable and not sustained, or the contact was with a sibling that had become lost to them rather than with parents or stepparents.

Two young people broke all links with their families once they left substitute care. Among those who left the family home, reasons for leaving varied, but included persistent physical abuse through childhood, a perception that parents were overly strict and controlling and from heated conflict over choice of partners. In a further instance, a young man felt he could no longer cope with his mother's severe mental

health problems. Evidence of the severity of some young people's distress and unhappiness while at home is provided in the following illustration.

Susan left home at 17 and has remained out of contact with her family for 23 years. As she explains, "I didn't get on with my parents, my parents didn't want me and I didn't want them". Her choice to leave was one that she had planned over time – "from a very early age all I wanted was to grow up, get a job and leave" – and her refusal to re-establish any contact when she was traced was linked to their rejection of her when she was a child: "If you really want me to be honest it's because I hated them and still do, even after all this time. They told me I wasn't wanted and they made it clear, so I grew to hate them like they [did] me."

## **Suicide**

Two young people aged 17 who went missing were found to have committed suicide. Although the context for this was not clear in one case, in the other, a young man had been suffering from depression for a long time and, although his body was not immediately discovered, it was concluded that he had killed himself the day he left home.

## **Drift**

The dispersal of families can lead to family members losing touch with one another. This applied to just a small number of those who were last seen before the age of 18 (4% of the case file sample). The circumstances surrounding these cases varied. In one instance, a caller's family had emigrated many years previously. He eventually returned to the UK but subsequently lost touch with his sister. Another young person went her own way after leaving care and gradually lost touch with her sister. Although these scenarios were diverse, there were some similarities. Loss of contact was usually long term and, where an outcome was known, virtually all had willingly re-established some form of contact, either in person or by letter.

## **Unintentional absence**

Some children clearly had no intention of losing touch with a parent or siblings. For around one in

ten of those aged under 18 in the case file sample (10%), this occurred when their families became divided as a consequence of the divorce or separation of their parents. In circumstances such as these, children often have little choice or control over the course of events. While these children were never 'missing' in the strict sense of the term, their referral to the NMPH represented an attempt by parents or siblings to renew contact, often after many years.

Some parents appeared to have been prevented from keeping in touch. For example, one mother who had fled domestic violence and had felt unable to take her child with her was only able to resume contact some 29 years later. Another mother, whose relationship had broken down when she was imprisoned, had still not managed to trace her son after a gap of 17 years. In other cases, parental resolve to retain contact had weakened. One father who complained of restricted access to his daughter, eventually lost touch completely. It turned out that the daughter knew where he was but had chosen not to contact him.

However, this response was relatively unusual. Most of those who responded in the follow-up sample felt that, although they had virtually no control over the events that had taken place, they had received a positive upbringing with the remaining parent or, in one case, grandparent. While most had not been unduly disturbed by the loss of contact over the years, they were mostly glad to have an opportunity to meet and re-establish a link with a missing parent or sibling.

## **Forced to leave**

Around one in twelve children and young people in the case file sample (8%), were forced to leave their homes. In particular, two categories of children emerged – those who were physically removed or abducted by a parent and those who were thrown out. This contrasts with the rarity of adults being forced apart.

## **Parental abduction**

Around one in twenty of the children in the case file sample had been physically removed by a parent. However, the files of all available cases of parental abduction were also analysed, making a total of 19 cases.

The removal of a child from their normal living environment by one parent renders the child missing to the other parent and can have harmful immediate and long-term effects on the children that are taken and the parent that is left behind (Hagar and Greif, 1991; Plass et al, 1997; Hatcher et al, 2000).

Abductions can range in duration from a short period, where one parent refuses to grant another legitimate contact with a child for a period of a few days or weeks, to circumstances where one parent takes the child away permanently (Plass et al, 1997).

All of these cases involved younger white children; none came from minority ethnic families. Over half were under eight years old at the time and, with one exception, all were aged 11 or under. In virtually all cases, the caller was the remaining parent searching for his or her children. The vast majority of these abductions involved the taking of a child or a sibling group, often to another country, or a failure to return them at the end of a scheduled contact visit.

The mother of a girl aged six had recently been awarded custody of her and the right to take her overseas. The father failed to return the child after a contact visit a few days before they were due to leave. The child was still missing some two years later.

A couple, whose marriage was in difficulty, took their child aged three with them on a family holiday abroad. The father had to return early and the mother subsequently failed to return with the child. They have been missing for eight years.

A mother, who had been suffering from depression after the break up of her relationship, took her child away from the father for two weeks before returning him.

### Thrown out of home

Significant numbers of young people under the age of 16 are forced to leave their homes. A recent UK nationwide survey of young people missing from home for one night or more found that almost one in five had been forced to leave (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999).

Two males in the case file sample had been told to leave the parental home. In one case, as reported by his grandmother, this stemmed from a long-standing conflict with his mother that was linked to over-restrictive parenting. The other derived from a young person's dependency on drugs and persistent stealing from his father to fund his habit. His mother, who was separated from the father, was attempting to trace him after two years.

### Summary

The reasons that adults or children become missing people are often complex and may or may not involve intent on their part. Almost two thirds of the adults (64%) and still more of the young people (70%) in the case file sample did decide to leave their homes, although not always in circumstances of their choosing. Among adults, the most common cluster of reasons for deciding to leave centred on a breakdown in relationship with a partner, parent, child or sibling. Some left to escape an accumulation of personal or financial problems, or to escape violence or avoid arrest, while others disappeared following a breakdown in their mental health or, in a small number of cases, to commit suicide. Most young people who decided to leave had run away, usually because of conflict with parents or other family members, but in some cases to escape abuse. Running away was also linked to difficulties at school, problems in young people's personal lives (including mental health difficulties) or to the influence of peers. A small group of older young people (aged 16 or 17) had decided to make a clean break from their families and start anew.

Drifting apart from relatives was a rarity for young people, but accounted for around one in five of adult missing people (19%). Most of those who drifted out of touch had lost contact as a result of moving away, although, in some cases, this appeared to be to avoid unacknowledged family problems. Others lost touch through drifting into a transient lifestyle, often connected to mental health, drug or alcohol problems.

Some adults (16%) and young people (10%) had no intention of going missing. Among adults, a majority were elderly people and suffering from dementia, whereas among young people, unintentional absences

were the consequence of separation from a parent or siblings as a result of the divorce or separation of their parents.

Adults were rarely forced apart from other relatives. However, this was the case for one in twelve of the children and young people (12%). Two young people had been thrown out of the parental home, while the majority of this group were younger children who had been physically abducted by a parent.

### **Note**

<sup>1</sup> The cases discussed here involve those where the missing person is the parent and where their now adult children are seeking some reunification. The alternative scenario, of parents seeking children that were lost to them, often for many years, will be discussed under the young person section. Clearly, however, these cases have much in common.



# Experiences of being away

The experiences of missing people while they are away are as diverse as the reasons for their absences and their experiences of being away were influenced by the reasons for which they went missing. The accounts of former missing people revealed that there were positive aspects to the experience, but that being away could also present difficulties, risks and dangers. This chapter describes their experiences of being away, together with their views on the help and assistance they needed. Evidence will be drawn from the 74 adults and 40 young people who completed follow-up questionnaires.

## Adults' experiences of being away

The majority of adults reported that they had been missing for a considerable period of time; three in five were missing for more than two years. The majority travelled a fair distance from their homes while they were away. Over two fifths (45%) reported that they had moved to another county or region and more than one fifth (22%) had moved abroad. In contrast, only 10% remained in the same town. Females were more likely to have remained in their local area and males were more likely to have moved to another county or region.

Adults stayed in a range of places while away (see Table 8). Most (60%) had only stayed in one place while they were away, but 9% had moved more than three times. Surprisingly, moving more or less often was not associated with the length of time away. However, it was associated with the types of places that people stayed: those who slept rough, in temporary accommodation such as a hostel, in a bed

**Table 8: Places stayed while away**

Places stayed	% of adults (n=74)
Own accommodation	51
With friends	12
With relatives	11
With somebody just met	12
Hostel	27
Bed and breakfast	8
Night shelter	8
Slept rough	28
Other (including hospital, hotel, refuge)	11

Note: Column does not total 100% as people may have stayed in several places.

and breakfast [ $p=.03$ ], night shelter or with friends, were more likely to have made more moves.

Sleeping rough was a fairly common experience among adults, affecting more than one in four of the sample. Those who had been missing more often in the past and those who had first gone missing at a younger age [ $p=.04$ ] were more likely to have slept rough. However, the likelihood of sleeping rough was not associated with the length of time that adults were missing.

## Positives aspects of being missing

Most adults (71%) found that being away had some positive aspects attached to it, although almost two thirds had also encountered difficulties.

Being able to make a fresh start was often reported as positive. This was particularly the case for those who had left as a result of marriage breakdown and for

others who had decided to stay away permanently. Going away or going missing also gave them the opportunity to leave difficult or abusive situations behind and start anew. For example, Jessica wrote: “No one could hurt me anymore. I have more confidence”. She had been missing for eleven years after leaving to escape a physically and sexually abusive partner.

For others, going missing was short term and could offer ‘time to think everything through’ or ‘time to chill out a bit’. Taking time out allowed some people to get a perspective on their situation and to reappraise their relationships: “I appreciate more what I have got, feel I am accepting less out of choice and trying not to stress myself about unimportant issues” (Mary, aged 59, missing less than a week).

On return, some people felt that there was greater understanding of the problems or stresses they had faced. One man, aged 56, who had been missing for four months felt like “it cleared the air, we could talk about why I left” and that they became “a closer family” because of his absence. Another said that he: “finally got the help and therapy needed to get better” (John, aged 33, missing for eight weeks).

Others described being away as a ‘long learning experience’ where the need to be independent and responsible for their own actions was seen as positive. This was particularly the case for some younger adults. For example, Sally went missing at 18 following a breakdown in her relationship with her parents, and felt that the experience brought the realisation that: “I can make it on my own if I have to and how strong a person I am”.

Independence and freedom from family constraints was something people of all ages reported as positive about being away. However, loss of family contact was keenly felt by many.

### **Negative aspects of being missing**

Overwhelmingly, the negative aspect of being away most often reported was the loss of family contact. For those who had left following the breakdown of their marriage, it was the loss of contact with their children that they found most difficult. Leaving children behind and breaking contact with parents or

siblings was also difficult for the women who had left to escape violent relationships.

Despite the fact that some people had left as a result of conflict within the family, and did not always regret having done so, many described feeling lonely, guilty or missing family members and others referred to the absence of support or security that a family unit offered. Frank, aged 56, who had been missing for three months, described what was difficult for him: “Missing my family terribly and wondering how worried (or not) they might be feeling, but re-asserting [to] myself that I did the right thing”.

In addition to the emotional distress and isolation experienced, many found the practicalities of survival difficult: having no money, nowhere to stay or nobody to contact for help. Three young men found ‘everything’ difficult about being away. One added: “The basics: clothes, food, toiletries, feeling sad, guilty”. From these accounts, it seems that going missing seldom provided straightforward solutions to the difficulties that people had faced in their lives and, in many cases, it appears as though it may have made things more difficult.

### **Risks and dangers experienced**

Over one third (36%) of adults had felt themselves to be in danger at some point while they were missing. Males and females were equally likely to report having been in danger. There was some evidence that those who had been missing more often in the past were more likely to report having been in danger [ $p=.04$ ]. There were some significant associations between the likelihood of reporting danger and where people stayed while they were missing. Over two thirds (70%) of those who had stayed in a hostel and four fifths (81%) of those who had slept rough reported having been in danger at some point.

Overall, with respect to sleeping rough, the findings are similar to other studies of homelessness and young runaways. Sleeping rough has been associated with heightened risk; a recent study found that rough sleepers are more than twice as likely to be victims of crime than the general population (Ballintyne, 1999).

Descriptions of the dangers experienced included accounts of being physically or sexually assaulted, or

feeling threatened by people around them: “someone who sleeps in doorways is in great danger every night and also days” (Ailsa, aged 44, missing for two years). A number of people described being mugged or physically attacked while in the street bedding down for the night. Two young men associated the dangers they felt with time spent in a hostel, describing either the hostel or the people they shared with as ‘bad’ and both made mention of people ‘who were mixed up in drugs’.

Concerns also centred on being approached by strangers during the night. A 38 year old man, who had left home with his car and stayed away for less than a week, felt at risk: “when parked in quiet lay-bys late at night cars have pulled [up] alongside me”. Some females who slept rough had similar fears: “people (men) have come up behind me and I was scared”. One young woman aged 22, alone in London and desperate to find somewhere to stay found herself being “controlled by men in order to survive”. She describes being sexually exploited and abused in addition to being severely beaten on a number of occasions during the eight months that she remained missing.

For others, feeling in danger was associated with their own mental health and three people either thought of, or attempted, suicide while away.

However, the risks encountered while missing were not always thought to be as severe as the risk of discovery. A small number of women who had escaped violence at home were very concerned about the dangers of being found by their former partners.

### **Worries about returning**

Worries about returning were common. Almost half (47%) of the adults had some concern about returning to the household they had left. Men were more than twice as likely as women to have worries about returning [ $p=.02$ ]. Those who reported suffering from depression were also significantly more likely to have worries about returning, as almost three quarters (72%) of this group reported worries [ $p=.02$ ].

The likelihood of reporting worries was not closely associated with reasons for being missing, although those who went missing due to financial problems

[ $p=.05$ ] or to problems with drugs or alcohol [ $p=.04$ ] were more likely to have worried about returning than others. However, having worries about returning was not significantly associated with whether people actually did return.

Individuals were often anxious about how their families would react to them and whether they would be accepted back. Quite often people felt embarrassed or guilty about leaving and were worried whether it would be possible to start again after the time they had spent away. Albert, aged 38, had been missing for less than a week and was:

“Worried that my wife would have quite understandably given up on me; that I would have to face the music; that I had let people down; that I wouldn’t be able to look close relatives in the eye; that I had wasted a lot of money; that I had caused great heartache to those nearest to me.”

Sally, aged 18, who went missing for three weeks, feared: “That it would just be the same as before. I knew I had hurt my family and was scared that they would not accept me or that it would be strained and awkward”. Others reported being worried that returning would mean having to face up to the problems that they had left behind, or that they would have to go back to the same situation as before.

### **Views and experiences of help and support**

Given the difficulties that can be associated with going missing, people were asked to describe who they had approached for assistance, what help they felt they had needed and their views on the help they were given.

Just over half (54%) of adults reported approaching one or more potential sources of help while missing, as shown in Table 9. Around one in six of the adults attempted to seek informal help from friends and this contrasts with the limited use made of wider kin networks or, indeed, of helpline services. The practical needs of adults away from home are reflected in the use made of social workers, advice and housing agencies, and medical services. What is perhaps more surprising is that only a minority of the

**Table 9: Potential sources of help approached**

Tried to get help from...	% of people (n=74)
A relative	7
A friend	18
A helpline	7
A social or advice worker	15
A housing agency	11
Doctor or nurse	15
The police	4
Other (including probation service, local church)	5

Note: Column does not total 100% as some adults sought help from a number of sources while others did not seek help.

sample tried any one of these services. As shall be seen, self-reliance was relatively common.

Nearly half (46%) of the adults in the follow-up sample reported that they had not attempted to seek help while they were missing. Although the written responses provided in the follow-up survey do not permit a systematic consideration of why people chose not to seek help, they do provide some valuable insights.

Responses from adults (and young people) pointed to the importance of publicising those services that do exist to help them. Some did not know where to turn for help: “sometimes it is very difficult to find [help] and different agencies give conflicting advice”. However, some adults were wary of approaching agencies for help and this avoidance of contact with agencies or extended family members appeared to be linked to a fear that they would simply encourage a return to an unchanged set of circumstances.

Avoidance of help could also occur in circumstances where going missing was linked to severe depression: “I was so depressed I wasn’t looking for any help, the opposite in fact. I was avoiding all help and contact with people I knew”.

Others did not seek help in relation to being missing, either because they preferred to strike out on their own and establish an independent life or because they had drifted out of touch with family members and had not really perceived themselves to be missing. Where adults had developed a transient lifestyle, although they may have used mainstream services to

help them resolve practical difficulties in their lives, they appeared less likely to seek help as a missing person.

The reasons missing people have for not seeking formal or informal help are therefore complex and require an understanding of the contexts and meanings that surround being missing. Some adults clearly opt for self-reliance. Others are either unaware of potential sources of support or are wary of approaching them. While others, as indicated previously, do not perceive themselves to be missing in the first place. These factors may help to explain why such a high proportion of adults reported that they did not seek or receive any help while they were away from home.

The types of help that people did receive point to the range of immediate needs that some missing people are likely to have (such as somewhere to stay, money, food, clothing and medical assistance where necessary), as shown in Table 10. Of those who did seek help, a number of people reported that they had received advice, information or counselling.

What may be more surprising, *prima facie*, are the small numbers who received assistance to contact family members or to mediate a return home. Perhaps this reflects a tendency for these to be personal decisions that are undertaken by the missing person themselves, although, as some of the following accounts reveal, it could also be as a result of a reluctance to initiate first contact with those that have been left behind.

**Table 10: Types of help received while missing**

Types of help	% of adults (n=74)
Advice or information	15
Counselling	7
Shelter	22
Money	11
Food	14
Medical	15
Assistance to contact someone	3
Assistance to return home	5

Note: Column does not total 100% as some adults sought more than one type of help while others did not seek help.

### **Adult perspectives on what could have been different**

Some adults felt that improved communication and understanding within their families might have prevented them from going missing. Where parents and children had lost contact as a consequence of marriage breakdown, some commented that this might have been avoided if the separation had been negotiated in a more amicable manner.

From a service perspective, while adults generally seemed less certain than young people about the kinds of services that might have helped them, the findings do reinforce the need for advice, counselling and mediation services to be available to families at times of stress. Such services are likely to be helpful both before and after adults have gone missing. A number of people mentioned the importance of having someone independent of the family to talk to about their problems and help resolve family difficulties. The potential role of mediation services was raised not only in relation to marital breakdown and parental access to children, but also in assisting family reunification for those who had been missing. This was the case for one young woman, aged 18, who went missing for three weeks after persistent conflict with her parents:

“I am grateful for all the help my parents received and I am glad I realised it wasn’t a hopeless situation before it became one. I feel that people should be able to escape from situations and should not be forced into reconciliation but that a mediator could be a good idea in the less hopeless cases.”

As her comments suggest, agencies that work with the families of missing people and help to trace those who are missing have a central role to play. Although many adults may not wish to return, awareness of the efforts families have made to trace them – and of the support they have received – can help some missing people to realise how much they are cared for and the extent of the pain and suffering their absence has caused their families. This was poignantly illustrated by one woman’s account:

“Without all the help offered my family to try and find me – although very often I wanted to make contact with them, the longer time went on the harder it would have been to come back on my own

– it’s quite possible I may never have returned, even though I knew I wanted to, because a lifetime of memories and good family life you can never forget.”  
(Joan, aged 59, missing for two weeks)

Although adults were less likely to report reliance on friends while missing than young people, the importance of informal support from friends should not be underestimated, whether or not there is an intention to return home. In one instance, the shelter and support provided by friends enabled a young woman to reappraise her life and make a decision to return: “I didn’t receive help from any professionals but what help I did receive [from friends] probably saved my life and is why I am back home”. In another scenario, a man aged 50, whose marriage had broken down and who was suffering from depression, found that the support offered by a friend enabled him to gradually rebuild his life: “Assistance from a very close friend who assisted me with going out again, to hold my head up and ignore what people said and did”.

Some adults experiencing mental health difficulties or depressive illness reported difficulties gaining access to appropriate therapeutic services. Problems with obtaining treatment were identified by some as a contributory factor to going missing, while for one or two adults who had already gone missing, it affected their ability to re-stabilise their lives.

### **Young people’s experiences of being away**

Young people’s experiences, like those of adults, are likely to be influenced by the reasons for their missing episode. For example, the experiences of the group of young runaways are different to those of young people who were reported missing as a result of losing touch with a parent or sibling following the break up of their family. For those who chose to make a definite break in contact with their families, there are some similarities with the young people who ran away, particularly in relation to the circumstances they found themselves in when they had initially left. However, there are also some notable differences.

Young people who had run away were typically away for less than six months, whereas all of those separated through family break up had been missing for five years or more. Among those who had chosen to break links with their families, four out of five had been missing two years or more.

Those who had run away appear to have gone further afield while missing than is typical for runaways generally. Only 13% remained in their local area. Over two fifths (42%) went to another county or region and 8% went abroad. In a UK wide survey of runaways, around 60% of overnight runaways were found to have had stayed in their local area and only about 16% had gone further than a neighbouring city (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999).

A majority of the young people separated as the result of parental divorce went to another region, presumably with the parent or family members that they had remained with. It is not possible to know if the moves were made immediately following the family division, or whether the moves contributed to the subsequent loss in contact.

All of the young people missing following the division of their families stayed with relatives. In contrast, the young runaways and those who chose to break links with their family stayed in a variety of places. These included stays with friends or in temporary accommodation such as hostels or bed and breakfasts, interspersed with episodes of sleeping rough. Some older teenagers also found their own accommodation.

Many of those who had run away had stayed in very risky environments. Around half had stayed with friends and just one had stayed with a relative but, astonishingly, almost a third had stayed with a stranger and over two fifths had slept rough. However, data for *Still running* differs markedly in some respects: for the last occasion young people were missing, two fifths stayed with a friend, one quarter stayed with a relative and a further quarter slept rough (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999). In a companion study focusing on young runaways in Scotland, only 3% reported staying with a stranger while away (Wade, 2002). Although the findings of this study are based on a small sample of runaways, they are of concern

given the evident risks to which these young people were exposed while missing.

### **Risks and dangers experienced**

Being away from home carried risks and dangers for many of the young people, particularly for those who had run away. One in eight reported having been physically hurt and one in nine reported having been sexually assaulted while away. Levels of risk are further heightened by including the high proportion of young people who reported having slept rough or stayed with a stranger. By combining these risk factors, over one half (54%) of the young runaways had one or more of these risks attached to their time away from home. This proportion is somewhat higher than that found in a recent survey of runaways in Scotland (43%; Wade, 2002), but is in keeping with the findings that runaways reported to the NMPH tend to be drawn from the relatively small subgroup within the overall runaway population which has gone missing more often and remained missing longer.

Descriptions of the risks and dangers experienced by the young people further emphasise the worrying nature of these figures. Young people reported feeling unsafe or frightened while staying with strangers or on the streets, in addition to experiencing very dangerous situations. In the main, girls reported the experiences of risks and dangers. However, the numbers are too small to give a clear indication of patterns. The UK nationwide survey of runaways identified males as significantly more likely to have been physically hurt or to have been sexually assaulted. Young people who were away for longer were also more likely to have been physically hurt or to have been sexually assaulted (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999).

Some girls reported actual or attempted sexual assault, including rape. The youngest was Claire, aged 14, who was sexually assaulted while sleeping rough and subsequently took considerable risks to avoid having to sleep on the streets again. Sheila, aged 16, reported being scared of men who approached her: "I was scared especially when blokes spoke to me saying stuff like 'come back to mine' and 'I'll keep you safe'". She was raped while away. Others spoke of feeling unsafe 'in rough cities at night'.

Elaine was 17 years old when she ran away. She attributes her final decision to leave to the influence of her boyfriend, although she also reported experiencing problems at home.

Elaine spent 12 weeks away from home, during which time she stayed with friends, in a hostel, with someone she had just met and slept rough. She had often felt herself to be in danger and described being physically and sexually attacked. She felt that “boys and men think you’d do anything just because you’re homeless” and described a physical fight she had “with a boy we were staying with because I wouldn’t sleep with him”.

Other situations she described resulted from risky strategies she adopted in order to get money to survive while away. At one point, she sold drugs and was attacked by an addict. At other times, she said “we’d use the men to our advantage and take their money and when they realised we conned them lots became aggressive”.

The experience of being away was clearly fraught with risks and real dangers for the young people who had run away. For some young people, as has been seen, fears were often associated with specific incidents, but they also appeared to be part of wider concerns or apprehensions expressed by the young people in relation to the future and what would happen if, and when, they returned.

Again, some of the young people who had broken contact with their families had similar experiences to those who had run away. However, none of the young people separated following divorce or family separation reported being in danger at any point. This is as would be expected, as they remained living with a relative after losing touch with other family members.

### **Views on being away**

Young people were asked a range of questions on their views and experiences of being away. A majority of the runaways felt it gave them time to think, some relief from pressure and an opportunity to make friends. However, being away could also be a distressing experience. Many young people felt frightened, lonely or hungry and thirsty.

Furthermore, running away did not always make things better. Only a minority felt they were happier than they had been before and less than half felt that running away had helped them to resolve their problems.

Some young people reported that being missing was positive for them because they enjoyed the independence and the opportunity to make their own choices or decisions. However, all except one young person agreed that they found difficulties in being away from home. These included feeling ‘really alone’, and missing family and friends. Money, or the lack of it, was a problem for many of the young people. One girl described missing the “luxury of being at home” and another felt she was “scared a lot of the time and needed a friend and money”.

The need for money was also a difficulty reported by the young people who chose to break links with their family. However, the separation from their family, or at least some members of it, seemed to be more difficult for them. One woman found “not having contact with the family members I liked and [those who] liked me” was difficult. Another missed the support that a family offers and wrote that she would have liked the opportunity for support or advice at difficult times in her life. However, the same young woman found that leaving had given her freedom from her mother’s “overpowering influence”.

The absence of a parent or a sibling was a difficulty described by the group of young people who were reported missing as a result of family division. One young girl, who had been two years old when her mother left with her older sister, found it difficult: “wondering why my natural mother never tried to contact me, even through family. I also wondered if she remembered me on my birthday and at Christmas. I wondered what my sister was like”. However, all of these young people also described their upbringings as a positive aspect of the period they were ‘missing’ and referred to how well they were cared for. They were often emphatic about the love they had for the remaining parent.

**Table 11: Potential sources of help approached**

Sources of help tried	% of runaways (n=24)	% of other young people (n=16)
Friend(s)	42	25
Relative(s)	4	6
NMPH	13	6
Social or advice worker	8	6
Someone just met	13	0
Other	0	6

### Views and experiences of help and support

The issues associated with seeking assistance are likely to be quite different for the different groups of young people who went missing. The findings for young runaways and other young people are therefore reported separately. However, the importance of being cautious in interpreting these findings must be noted, as the numbers involved are small.

Table 11 shows the sources of help tried by young people. What is of most interest overall is that among young people help was primarily sought from friends and much less often from extended family or professionals.

Compared to adults in the follow-up sample, young runaways in particular were more than twice as likely to seek help from friends. The importance of informal support from friends for survival among young people who run away from home has been highlighted in recent literature (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999; Wade, 2002). Reliance on extended family networks for support, however, appears low for the relatively small number of runaways in this sample, since the Safe on the Streets research found that more than one third of those who had run away overnight had relied solely on support from wider kin while they were away from home. It has previously been suggested in this study that runaways reported to the NMPH may come from a small subgroup of the overall runaway population. They are likely to have been missing more often in the past and away for longer periods. It may be that these factors help to explain the limited reliance that they were able to place on extended family members.

**Table 12: Types of help received while missing**

Help in relation to	% of runaways (n=24)	% of other young people (n=16)
Advice/information	38	13
Somewhere to stay	29	19
Money	29	6
Food	33	13
Medical needs	13	6
Contacting family/carers	13	13
Returning home	29	0

Overall, more than a third (38%) of the young people reported that they received no help while they were away. This includes one quarter (25%) of those who had run away, which is a worrying finding, given the vulnerability of children and young people while away from safe adult care. Young people reported having received help in a wide range of areas, as shown in Table 12.

The young people who had run away were more dependent on receiving help from others to survive than was the case for adults. The need for advice and information, for somewhere to stay, for money and food was more pressing for these young people and a greater proportion reported having received help in these areas from friends. A larger proportion of young runaways, than other groups, received assistance to re-establish links with their families or carers.

For other groups of missing young people their need for practical support was likely to have been more variable. Those young people who had lost touch with family members through family break up would, in all likelihood, have continued to live with one of their parents and this helps to explain the relatively low numbers that sought or received help from other sources. Those who left home aged 16 or 17, choosing to break links with their families and whose needs were likely to be similar to those of other young adults, may have helped to increase the numbers who received practical help with food, advice and accommodation.

Taking all young people together, one third (33%) reported not having sought help. Among young runaways the number that did not seek assistance was



smaller (17%), but, given their particular vulnerability while away from home, is still of concern.

### **Young people's perspectives on what could have been different**

Most young people who run away or break links with their families at 16 or 17 rarely do so through choice. As one young person's account illustrated: "It's scary and you don't like it! Some people think that young people run away because they want to, but they don't – honestly!". Running away can be frightening, spontaneous and, as has been seen, carries considerable risks.

A common response from young people when asked what might have prevented them running away, was to point to the need for parents to listen to their children more carefully, treat them with greater respect and to take their concerns more seriously:

"Maybe if I had someone who would listen to me, or if my mum didn't jump to conclusions and let me have my say. It may not have stopped me but I would have been able to control my temper and have some respect for my mum."

This comment, from a girl involved in peer-related absences, acknowledges her own contribution to tensions within the family but also suggests that, if her parents had adopted a different approach, the conflict might have been less divisive and some form of subsequent reconciliation made easier. Another young person who ran away for similar reasons felt that she could have done more to avoid the negative peer group with which she associated: "If I wasn't involved with my boyfriend and his bad crowd of friends". Her running away ceased when she successfully broke these links with the support of her parents.

The parenting of teenagers is undoubtedly a difficult task, one involving a considerable degree of patience and negotiation about acceptable boundaries. One girl, aged 15, felt that this communication had been lacking and that her parents had been too restrictive and controlling:

"If family and parents were more understanding then it can prevent this situation from happening....  
[Running away can occur] when carers or parents

don't give permission for going out or restricting a lot, which happens especially with girls. It would help for the parents and child/person to talk, which I should have done before, but you only realise after the incident happens. It was not planned."

In a similar vein to adults, young people often mentioned a need to share their feelings and problems with someone external to the family. Access to counselling, whether at school or from another source, might have helped put problems into perspective and perhaps prevented a need to run away:

"Running away never helps people solve their problems. I realised that when it was too late.... If you meet the right people you will be OK, like I was, but most of the time you end up sleeping rough. They should have people that talk to us, so we can clear it out, because in our eyes the only way out is to run away."

Counselling and family mediation were therefore considered important by some young people as preventive strategies, but also as a means for negotiating a safe return home and to help resolve any underlying difficulties within the family that might have prompted running away.

It is difficult to over-estimate the degree to which young people are vulnerable to exploitation while they are away from safe adult care. Previous research on running away has consistently highlighted these risks and pointed to the need for services that will help young people to avoid exposure to the streets through the provision of safe refuges (Newman, 1989; Rees, 1993; Stein et al, 1994; Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999). The need for a safe place to stay, especially for those under the age of 16, was stressed by a number of young runaways in this study; none more forcefully than in the following testimony:

"Some nights I stayed at some boys' houses because it was better than sleeping on the streets. After I was sexually assaulted it didn't matter what I had to do to get off the streets. I'd been forced to do it before it didn't make any difference. I wish there was somewhere I could have stayed where I didn't have to do this."

Limitations in the supply of supported accommodation options for young people who leave home aged 16 or 17 are also a matter of genuine concern (Biehal et al, 2000). Without a safe place to stay, the risks faced by young people were heightened. The following comments also highlight how readily young people in this age group can slip through the welfare net:

“The last time I left home, I was 17. When I wanted help, I was told I was too young for hostel and was told to leave, and I was too old for social services, so that left me with nothing... I would have liked to have been given some form of accommodation that’s safe.”

Many young people are unaware of local services at the time they run away. Some young people felt that it would be helpful if services were easier to access, for instance, through the provision of drop-in centres or street-based services. Informal links of this kind could provide practical help and information:

“Maybe if there was an organisation ... who goes around the streets, especially of an evening and in prominent areas where runaways are known to go, to help kids at that level on the street, to get them out of the dangers they are in.... I just wish that something like that was around when I was that age.”

The majority of young runaways do return home of their own accord (Rees, 1993; Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999). For some young people, running away appeared to provide a shock that was sufficient for the family to mobilise its resources and seek a solution to those problems that motivated the absence: “when I ran away I think it may have been a wake-up for my parents to see how unhappy I was”. In many cases, therefore, families are able to use their own strengths to resolve the situation. In other cases, young people (and indeed parents) may appreciate help from outside. One girl, for example, who had been sexually assaulted while missing and was deeply unhappy with the response of the police and her family, continued to be troubled: “at the time, I wish I had someone to talk to about it, who didn’t know me and who wouldn’t judge me over what happened. I kept everything inside then I would cry every night when no one was there”.

For some, contact from the NMPH represented the first point at which they were aware that someone

had been trying to locate them. Others felt that, without the help of the agency, they would not have had the courage or would never have known how to contact someone who was missing to them:

“My father lives abroad and, almost for certain, if he had not used the Helpline he might not have found me. I had thought about looking for him but never quite had the courage or urge to. But if I had tried to find him I think it would never have happened. Thank you so much for being the link in a broken chain and opening a new relationship in my life.”

## Summary

People identified both positive and negative aspects to going missing. Positive aspects included the chance to make a fresh start, time to think, greater independence and some relief from pressure. However, many also reported experiencing emotional distress, isolation and difficulties relating to money and finding somewhere to stay.

Many adults and young people experienced a considerable degree of danger while they were away and reported being threatened, attacked or sexually assaulted, often while they were on the streets. Sleeping rough was a common experience among both adults and young runaways.

While away, missing people tended to rely more heavily on informal support from friends than they did from professionals or family members. Some did not know where to turn for professional help, others were wary of approaching agencies, as they feared they might be encouraged to return to an unchanged set of circumstances.

People described their considerable anxiety about renewing contact with their families or returning home. They feared their families’ reaction, worried about whether they would be accepted, and felt embarrassment, shame and guilt. Mediation by a third party, such as the NMPH, had helped a number of people overcome these obstacles to renewing contact.

The circumstances in which people renew contact are explored in Chapter Five.

## Consequences of being missing

During the year of the study, 1,279 people were traced by the NMPH, of whom 1,156 individuals (90%) were found alive. Some of these had been missing for a considerable period of time. Among those *newly* reported to the NMPH during the year of the study, 35% of cases remained unresolved. Since a proportion of these new cases were opened only a short time before the study ended, it is likely that at least some of these would be resolved eventually, indicating that the clear-up rate would be greater than 65%. This is, nevertheless, likely to be lower than the location rates for missing persons cases reported to the police, due to the nature of the NMPH's strategic role. The NMPH accepts reports on people not necessarily considered vulnerable or at risk, who the police are unlikely to search for and who may have been missing for some time, as well as on those who would also come to the attention of the police. National figures for the location of missing people by the police are not available in the UK, but in Australia, police location rates for missing people are over 95% (Henderson et al, 2000).

The earlier sections of this chapter discuss patterns for those found alive, while those who died while missing are discussed separately later.

### Length of time missing

The time that people remained missing before being found (that is, the period between the time they were last seen and the time that they returned, made contact or were traced), ranged from less than a day to over 60 years. Many people were found quite quickly, but after one week's absence the likelihood

of being found appeared to decrease as time progressed.

The time that elapses before people are *reported* missing may of course be influential. People are not always reported missing promptly. Sometimes those left behind cannot agree on the circumstances in which people disappeared and may not initially consider them 'missing', which leads to delays in making missing persons reports to the police (Keil, 1984). Those considered vulnerable or otherwise at risk, and those whose disappearance is sudden or unexpected, may be reported missing sooner than those who have drifted out of contact over a period of time. Children and young people under 18 are typically reported missing to the police within a shorter time since their last sighting than is the case for adults. Reporting times for adults may depend on their lifestyle and living arrangements; for example, whether they are in regular contact with others who would realise that they were missing. If people are reported a considerable time after they were last seen, and no one has searched for them in the interim, they are likely to be missing for longer.

The prioritisation of missing persons cases by the police may also influence the duration of missing episodes. Those that the police define as 'vulnerable,' such as children, elderly people or people with health or mental health conditions that might put them at risk, receive more urgent police attention. Attempts would therefore be made to trace them much sooner after they were last seen, increasing the likelihood that they would be found in a shorter period of time. This may help to explain why time missing varied with the age at which individuals went missing (as shown in Table 13), although the reasons for which

people become missing are also likely to be influential. For example, people missing as a consequence of relationship breakdown or in order to escape violence may make a determined effort to avoid being found.

Nearly one third of children under 13 were found within one month, but after this time the likelihood of tracing them declined and half remained missing for five years or more (virtually all of whom were in fact missing for over 10 years). The majority of these children were missing as a consequence of parental separation or parental abduction.

The case files show that the majority of teenagers who went missing between the ages of 13 and 17 years were young runaways. Although they were likely to return or be traced more quickly than most other groups of missing people, their absences tended to be longer than is typical for the wider population of young runaways. A UK nationwide survey of young runaways found that around two thirds were away for just one night or less and only 14% were missing for a week or more, far fewer than the 73% missing for one week or more in this study's sample (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999).

This discrepancy is likely to be due to reporting patterns. It is probable that most young runaways are only reported to the NMPH if they have been missing for more than just a short period of time (although they may have been reported to the police sooner). In view of this, it is likely that the young runaways in this study may have gone missing for more serious reasons than the one-off arguments that may prompt briefer running away episodes.

Adults in early and middle adulthood tended to remain missing longer than older adults, with only 20–24% found within one month and nearly one third missing for five or more years. However, the pattern changes for adults aged over 50, as the proportion found within one month begins to rise and the proportion missing for five years or more declines. The case files indicate that those who were found more quickly were people who left for reasons associated with mental health problems, including depression, who were reported in increasing numbers in this age group.

People who went missing when over the age of 60 years were the most likely to be found quickly. In the case file sample, over half of those reported missing in this age group were suffering from dementia or mental health problems. This highly vulnerable group were found more rapidly, perhaps due to the fact that they would be a priority for the police and that they may not actively try to avoid being found.

## Exploring outcomes

Very few people returned to the place they had left. Overall, just 20% returned, although a further 39% did make contact with those searching for them. However, 41% refused to renew contact. Yet again, patterns varied with age, as shown in Table 14.

People who had gone missing between the ages of 13 and 17 years were the most likely to return, followed by those who left before the age of 13 or over the age of 50. Younger teenagers (age 13–15) were far more likely to return than 16–17 year olds, while

**Table 13: Percentage missing in each age group by time missing**

Age	Period of time						Number of people (n=1,105)
	<1 week*	<1 month	1-6 months	6-24 months	2-5 years	5+ years	
0-12	26	30	10	4	6	50	50
13-17	27	59	23	6	3	10	249
18-30	7	24	20	14	13	30	369
31-50	6	20	17	18	14	32	327
51-60	14	29	22	16	14	19	58
61+	42	62	17	2	6	13	52

Notes: \*These figures are incorporated into the next column (<1 month). Columns 2-6 may not equal 100 due to rounding.

**Table 14: Percentage returned, made contact or refused contact in each age group**

Age	Returned	% Renewed contact	Refused contact	Number of people (n=1,148)
0-12	25	35	40	52
13-17	39	28	33	257
18-30	12	45	43	393
31-50	12	42	46	335
51-60	25	37	37	59
60+	25	33	42	52

Note: Columns 2-4 may not equal 100 due to rounding.

these older teenagers were more than twice as likely to refuse contact than younger teenagers. For the majority of adults, however, the likelihood of returning was even lower: only 24% of those between the ages of 18 and 50 years did so. People were significantly more likely to return after a shorter period of absence than after a longer one, perhaps because return was no longer feasible given the passage of time. Nearly two thirds (63%) of those known to have returned had done so within one month and 85% had done so within six months. After two years' absence, the number who returned was negligible.

Although the proportion that returned was low, many others nevertheless agreed to make contact with their families once found. The potential for reconciliation (or at least some contact) with families appeared to be greater for those who went missing as teenagers (67% either returned or renewed contact with their families). Only 60% of those missing before the age of 13 and 56% of adults either renewed contact or returned.

It is clear that in all age groups a substantial minority of those traced refused to re-establish contact with relatives. This variation in the likelihood of returning, renewing contact or refusing contact across different age groups was linked to the reasons for being missing that predominated in each of these age groups.

### Tracing patterns: reasons for leaving and outcome

So far, it can be seen that both patterns of time missing and patterns of outcome are associated with

the age at which individuals went missing. There has also been some indication that the variation in these patterns may be linked to the reasons for which people in these age groups are most likely to go missing. Analysis of the case files revealed a clear relationship between reasons for going missing and time missing, as shown in Figure 3.

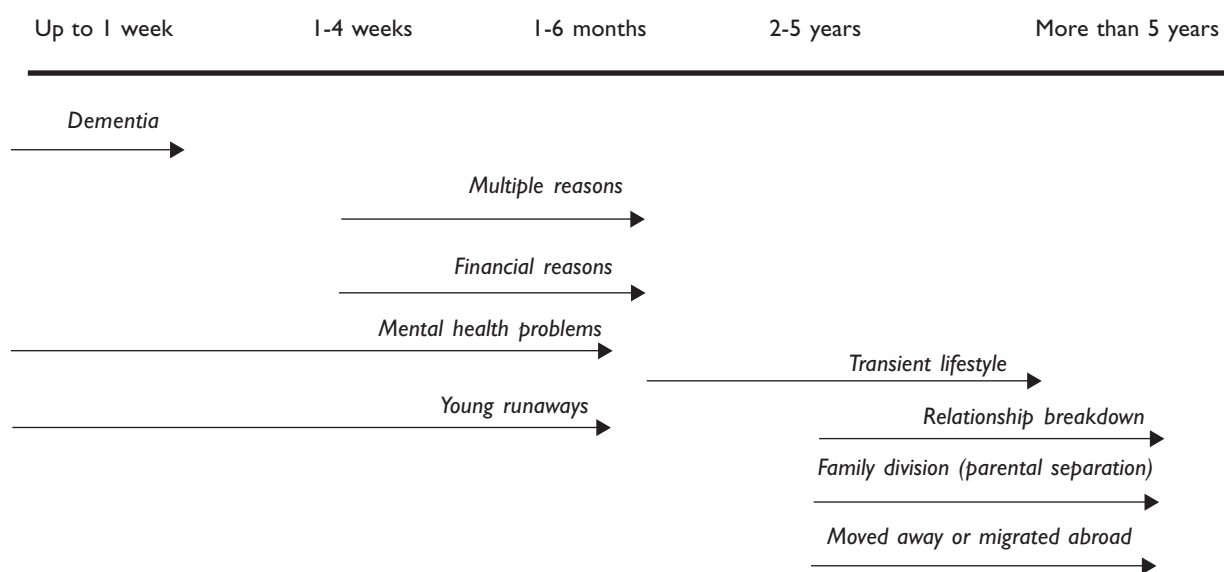
By considering the principal groups that go missing, links can be unravelled between the reasons for leaving, age at going missing, time missing and outcomes, drawing on evidence both from the case files and the follow-up survey.

### Children missing unintentionally or forced out of contact

The majority of the 0-12 year olds in the case file sample were missing involuntarily. They were either forced out of contact due to parental abduction or became missing when their families divided as a consequence of parental separation. As has been shown, if young children are not traced rapidly, they are at risk of remaining missing (to the other parent and sometimes to siblings) for many years. In these circumstances, there is a considerable risk that the severing of contact with parents, and possibly with other family members, will be long term.

Only 25% of those in the database sample who had been missing from the age of 12 years or under returned. The low rate of return is partly due to the fact that many were adults by the time they were traced. In addition, the case files revealed that where children had become missing as a consequence of parental separation, sometimes children had been kept by one parent rather than taken away and the other parent, who had left, had later been unable to trace them. In both instances, return was not an issue.

**Figure 3: Time missing by reason for going missing (n=387)**



Those who did return were children who had been rapidly found, usually within a matter of weeks. A nationwide study in the US has revealed that most family abductions are short-lived, as 81% last for only a week or less (Lewit and Schuurmann Baker, 1998). Abducted children reported to the NMPH were perhaps more likely to be among the more intractable cases; those that had not been rapidly resolved by the police. Cases of family abduction in the case file sample that were newly reported to the NMPH during the year of the study had been missing for periods ranging from nine months to eight years. Over half of these cases remained unresolved by the end of the study period.

Although these children may not have chosen to break contact themselves, it has been shown that 40% of those in the database sample who had been missing from before the age of 13 refused to renew that contact (most often with a parent) in later life. Analysis of the case files shows that the overwhelming majority of children in this age group would be missing due to family division or parental abduction. However, qualitative analysis of the small number of cases in the case file sample of children missing as a consequence of parental separation highlighted the potential for reconciliation in these circumstances. Once traced, most of this group did renew contact. Most commonly, it was those children and young people who had lost contact

with their fathers following parental separation many years earlier who later refused to re-admit them to their lives. For many people who become unintentionally separated from other family members during childhood, therefore, the repercussions of parental conflict may be long term.

Polly was three years old when her parents divorced. Her sister was taken away to live with her mother while she remained with her father. She did not know of her sister until she was seven years old. She wrote: "I was happy with my life and I was too young to do anything, as I got older I did think about my sister a lot and when she was 16 I tried to find her but with no luck". She later "tried lots of different things to find my sister" as "she was all I was interested in but it was difficult because I didn't have enough information". After 20 years apart she was happy to be found by her sister, who had reported her missing to the NMPH.

Non-family abduction, although the most feared type of missing child incident, is rare. In the US, non-family abductions accounted for less than 1% of the total number of missing persons reported in 1998 (Lewit and Schuurmann Baker, 1998). There were no examples of stranger abduction of a child in the case file sample for this study.

### **Adolescents: running away and relationship breakdown**

Nearly two thirds of the 13–17 year olds in the case file sample had run away and around one in twenty had made a deliberate decision to leave home permanently as a consequence of relationship breakdown. Only two younger children ran away. However, although the numbers of younger runaways in the sample was small, younger children do constitute a substantial minority of runaways. A self-report study found that around one in four runaways did so for the first time before the age of 11 (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999).

As has been shown, nearly six out of ten 13–17 year olds returned or were traced within one month (almost half of these within one week). The younger teenagers, aged 13–15 years, were generally traced more quickly than the 16–17 year olds. The 16–17 year olds were twice as likely as the younger group to remain missing for more than six months and indeed most had remained missing for a number of years. The younger teenagers were also far more likely to return home, as nearly half of them did so, compared to less than a fifth of the older group.

Analysis of the case files and the follow-up survey sheds some light on these patterns, indicating that for the majority of those who left at the age of 16–17 years, relationships had broken down and they had been determined to make a complete break, whereas many of the younger teenagers were runaways missing for shorter periods of time. It is undoubtedly easier for 16–17 year olds who are unhappy at home to find a means of living independently and therefore to avoid returning. Young runaways whose absences were peer based, or related to involvement in crime, were more likely to return than those whose absences were rooted in serious family conflict. Those who returned voluntarily usually did so within a few days. Only one fifth of the runaways made contact but did not return and just two young people (4% of all runaways) refused all contact.

The influence of peers often went hand in hand with other pressures. For example, one 16 year old girl explained that she had run away because she felt her parents did not understand her, but she also said that it had been her boyfriend's idea to run away. She returned home after being away for less than a week: "My boyfriend and I called our parents, we went home and I sorted things out from there". After returning home she said she split up with her boyfriend and realised that he was the main reason she had been unhappy.

Most young runaways returned voluntarily within one month, often after hearing from their parents or hearing of their parents' concern for them, or because they missed their families. For example, one girl who had broken off contact with her family when she was 16 because they disapproved of her boyfriend, 12 years older than her, returned because: "I missed my family and knew how upset they were".

Difficult experiences while away also prompted some young runaways to return. As the previous chapter indicated, young runaways can face considerable risks while missing.

Claire, aged 14, was taken back home by police after staying away for a week. She left home because things were not going well there. She had lived alone with her father since her parents split up and explained that: "I always argue with my dad, he expects me to be perfect at everything (which I am not) and he blames me for everything". While away, Claire had been assaulted. She eventually went to the police where she reported the assault and they brought her home. It appears as though things at home had not improved for her: "Now me and my dad still don't get on very well. We can't talk about anything we feel inside, it's like we only live together because we have to. I know I've messed up my life but I wish I could have another chance".

### **Relationship breakdown**

Adults who went missing intentionally due to relationship breakdown constituted the largest group of adults in the case file sample (30%). People aged 18–30 years (the peak age range for adult missing persons) were the most likely to go missing due to

relationship breakdown, but some adults in their forties and fifties also did so. These missing episodes were usually of long duration. Two thirds of them were missing for two years or more and half remained missing for over five years.

People who left as a result of relationship breakdown rarely returned. Those who did so were young adults who went missing due to conflict with parents. They mentioned arguments, feeling misunderstood or, as one of them put it, “the unbearable situation and atmosphere at home”. Those who returned were rarely missing for more than a few weeks or months. Once contacted by the NMPH, the key factors that prompted their return were reassurance that they would be accepted back and the fact that both parties were keen to rebuild relationships. As one young woman explained, she had returned because of:

“The promise of a new start. Knowing that they would try and support me and accept me. Knowing I would have a bed to sleep in and food to eat, clean clothes and hot water. Most importantly, because I missed my family.” (Sally, 18, missing three weeks – relationship breakdown with parents)

Just under one third of those who left as a result of relationship breakdown renewed contact. Individuals who had gone missing as a result of parent/child conflict or sibling conflict in early adulthood often renewed contact, sometimes after a few months but more commonly after a number of years. Some who had disappeared due to conflict with parents had in consequence become missing to siblings, with whom they were not in conflict. Once traced by a brother or sister, they were happy to get back in touch. Men who had lost contact with their children due to marriage breakdown many years earlier and had been traced by them in later life were also likely to renew contact once they were found. In some cases, family conflicts or other difficulties had lasted for many years before people left: serious emotional problems, substance abuse or mental health problems of a family member, or histories of parental rejection or abuse were mentioned by a number of those who later renewed contact. When found, their relatives’ approach to them had led missing people to reconsider their decision to cut themselves off from their families.

Some were surprised that relatives had wished to find them after so many years and were initially ambivalent about renewing contact. They still felt considerable bitterness about earlier family conflicts:

“Following a family disagreement, my wife and sons and I had nothing more to do with any of my mother or brothers. I and mine were happy with this and no contact was made by the others.... I later moved away from the area and no contact was sought by either side.” (Michael, missing 20 years, from age 36)

Others were delighted to be found, having wished to renew contact for many years but been afraid to do so. Most were prompted to renew contact as a result of a relative tracing them, in most cases through the NMPH. This led many of them to re-evaluate the situation:

“My mother – the minute I heard her voice on the phone I just wanted to be there with her.” (Zoe, missing 25 years, from age 21 – escaping domestic violence)

“I received a letter from the NMPH asking me to contact one of my sisters. Having spoken to (my sisters) and been told how much they wanted to get back together with me and my wife, we decided it was time to re-establish relationships.” (Samuel, missing 30 years, from age 26 – conflict over choice of partner)

More than half (58%) of the adults missing due to relationship breakdown refused to make any contact at all once they were traced and a few even refused to allow the NMPH to inform their families that they had been traced. This group included those whose relationships with their parents had broken down due to conflict over their choice of partner as well as others who left due to parent/child conflict. Women who had gone missing to escape domestic violence or in order to end their marriage and pursue a new relationship were also among those who refused contact with any relatives, for fear that their ex-husbands might trace them as a result. Continuing resentment, bitterness about the past and anxiety about the difficulties that a renewal of contact might bring led many to refuse all contact. Having established new lives, they explained that they feared a renewal of contact and wished to put the past behind them:



“I am sure my family have said it was me doing all the wrong things and they were innocent. However this is not the case.... I would like to thank you for keeping my whereabouts quiet.... I have a new life and family and name and don't want the can of worms open again dictating what I can and can't do, showing my kids the kind of environment I was brought up in.” (Patrick, missing six years, from age 21 – conflict over choice of partner)

“May not be able to control myself when confronting ex-wife, still hurt and angry. I am afraid for myself to harm her.... Getting on with my life but still have nightmares of my past.” (Lewis, missing six years, from age 50 – marriage breakdown)

### **Multiple or financial problems**

Adults missing intentionally due to an accumulation of stresses or to financial problems accounted for one in ten of the case file sample. In most cases, their difficulties included a combination of financial and marital problems, often accompanied by depression, serious health problems (for themselves or a relative) and sometimes by work-related problems. This group were missing for relatively shorter periods than those who left due to relationship breakdown. Half had been traced within six months and three quarters found within two years.

They were also more likely to return than others who left intentionally. Some people under stress disappeared very briefly, returning after only a few days. Others attempted to make a new life elsewhere. These people sometimes planned and prepared for their disappearance, for instance by threatening or faking suicide, but later returned. One woman, who was depressed and attempting to escape from multiple problems, found a job in another part of the country but returned after six months. While another man had faked suicide but was found living in another part of the country two months later and was brought home by his brother.

In most cases, being contacted by someone in their family prompted them to return. The key factor was that their partners or parents made it clear to them that they would accept them back and support them in resolving the difficulties that had led them to go missing. The crisis had led them to talk more openly

with family members about their problems, and speaking to relatives on the phone gave them the confidence to return:

“I made contact with my family for the first time after leaving home.... I was missing my family terribly and felt strongly that we had to talk and clarify some issues, even though the replies may not have been palatable.” (Frank, 56, missing three months)

“My wife actually was a gem. She sorted out my financial problems and helped me through my counselling sessions and said that I should have told her about (the abuse suffered at the hands of) my father, but like I said, I hadn't told anyone for nearly 30 years.” (Philip, 38, missing two weeks)

Only a small number refused to return or make contact with relatives once they were found.

### **Vulnerable adults: mental health, learning disability and dementia**

There were small numbers of adults with mental health problems (7% of the case file sample) in all age groups and a few with learning disabilities. While most adults with depression had left intentionally, a few of those with mental health problems left unintentionally and had not really been aware of what they were doing at the time. The proportion suffering from depression or other mental health problems increased among those over 50 years old. Adults aged 60 and over were even more likely to be vulnerable, as over half were suffering from dementia or mental health problems. In addition, some of those missing due to their transient lifestyle had mental health problems, and these are discussed separately later.

Vulnerable adults were usually found more quickly than other missing people, the majority within six months. Those with dementia, who constituted over half of the vulnerable adults in the case file sample, were usually found within a few days. The vast majority of vulnerable adults of all ages returned. They were far more likely to return home after a missing episode than other adults. A small number had disappeared briefly following a depressive breakdown but returned within a week or two; others with mental health problems disappeared from home or hospital apparently inexplicably but then

returned once found. Some were anxious about returning and ashamed of the distress they had caused:

“Just embarrassed and I felt guilty about the worry and upset I had caused my family.” (John, 33, missing eight weeks – depression)

The mediation of the NMPH sometimes gave them the confidence to return. A few people with mental health problems did not return, but nevertheless renewed contact. This small group was composed of people with mental health problems living in hostels or other supported accommodation in the community who suddenly disappeared but were found to be living elsewhere a few weeks or months later.

### ***Drift: moving away, migration and transient lifestyle***

Around one fifth of adults under the age of 50 had drifted out of contact; the younger ones typically due to a transient lifestyle, while most of those aged 30 and over had lost contact after moving away or migrating abroad. The former were usually traced within five years, but those who had drifted out of contact after moving away or migrating tended to remain missing for lengthy periods of time, with more than half missing for over five years.

Very few individuals who drifted out of contact returned to the place they had left. The small number who did were homeless men who had drifted out of contact due to their transient lifestyle but had been found within two years. However, over half of those who drifted out of contact did renew contact with relatives once they were traced. As most had been away for several years, they were unlikely to return. Virtually all of those who had drifted out of contact when they were teenagers – for periods ranging from 3 to 47 years – willingly re-established some form of contact when traced, either in person or by letter.

Andy had become separated from his sisters 11 years earlier. He had grown up in local authority care and had moved between a dozen children's homes, from which he had repeatedly absconded until leaving care at 18 with no aftercare support from his local authority. Homeless, he took turns staying with his sisters, but felt that their partners resented his presence. He accordingly left, at the age of 25, and drifted into a transient lifestyle:

“I felt I was in the way, so I wandered from town to town. I was caught up in drug abuse and spent time in prison on and off for 10 years. I felt I had to find a new identity everywhere I travelled, I felt rejected by everyone. I suffered a nervous breakdown and suffered drug-induced psychosis. Because of my past upbringing I denied I had a family so I wouldn't have to explain my past and present situation to people I met.... When I last went missing I felt it had to be for good because I just felt insecure and unwanted and labelled as a misfit who would never change, so therefore couldn't be helped.”

He explained his desire to renew contact:

“The loss of my family, the urge to return. The need to know how they are. The guilt of denying I had a family. The feeling of losing my roots and childhood. The need to tell someone, just to talk about my family, and to belong.”

He felt that re-establishing contact with his sister, although not without problems, had been immensely positive for him:

“Since contacting my sister again after 11 years I have had some conflicts and heartaches, but no disasters or regrets. I feel I can move on with my life. The reconciliation with my sister and other relatives overcame the disappointments of the past and I now love, value and respect those I am back in touch with.”

However, he had no desire to return to live with her again:

“So much has changed, people I knew, even family members have died in the time I've been away. I felt vulnerable, and that by going back I would only be recreating all the problems that I ran away from.”

Significantly, a substantial minority of people who were believed to have simply drifted away refused to renew contact with relatives once they were traced. In these cases, the breaking of links clearly did not occur through happenstance. The reluctance to renew relationships suggests that problems in family relationships may underlie a number of these apparently unintentional ruptures. While families left behind may conceptualise these situations as drifting apart, in a number of cases they clearly represent a deliberate break by the missing person, who has no desire to renew contact.

### Gender

Gender and time missing were significantly associated with one another, but only for shorter absences of up to six months. Young runaways who were female were nearly three times as likely to be found within one month as males of the same age, although it is unclear from the data why this should be so. In contrast, among adults aged 24 and over, men were twice as likely to be traced within one month as women. This contrast became even more marked as age increased, with men aged 50 years and over four times as likely to be traced within one month.

Analysis of the case files suggests that these patterns derive from the fact that men were more likely than women to go missing for financial or multiple reasons, due to dementia or in order to commit suicide. As has been shown, people found alive after leaving home for these reasons are likely to be discovered relatively quickly. In contrast, women were more likely to leave as a result of relationship breakdown or to escape violence and as a result, they tended to remain missing longer. Those who left because of conflict with parents over choice of a partner were usually, although not exclusively, female, and this group also tended to remain missing long term.

### Ethnic origin

Members of minority ethnic groups were likely to remain missing for a shorter time than white people. As discussed in Chapter Two, young black people and those of Asian and mixed ethnic origin were more likely to go missing between the ages of 13 and 17 years than young white people. It is also known that the majority of 13-17 year olds who go missing are

young runaways, most of whom remain missing for a relatively short time. In the case file sample, only just over half of the young white people had run away, whereas all of the young African-Caribbean people ran away, as had many of the young people of Asian origin. People from minority ethnic groups may therefore be missing for shorter periods due to differences in the age profiles of the different ethnic groups reported missing and, associated with this, in their type of absence. It is also possible that variations in reporting patterns across ethnic groups may be a factor.

### Missing people found dead

During the year of the study, 10% of cases closed by the NMPH concerned people who were found to have died (a total of 123). The proportion who died while missing appears high when compared with police figures. For example, 1997/98 figures for the Metropolitan Police record that 0.5% of cases with a known outcome had resulted in the death of the missing person (Newiss, 1999). While the reasons for this discrepancy are not certain, it is likely to be linked to differences in reporting patterns to the NMPH and in the strategic role of the agency. First, NMPH attempts to trace people who may have gone missing many years previously, more of whom are likely to have died simply as a result of the passage of time. Second, police forces are likely to refer cases to NMPH when there is a high degree of concern about the missing person's vulnerability in order to maximise publicity for the case. Where people are highly vulnerable, there may be a greater likelihood of them being found dead.

**Table 15: Percentage found dead in each age group (n=1,271)**

Age	%	
	Found dead	Found alive
Under 13	4	96
13-17	2	98
18-30	16	84
31-39	11	89
40-49	18	82
50-59	14	86
60+	26	74

Analysis of the main database showed that men were significantly more likely to be found dead than women: 77% of those who were found to have died were male. Similarly, in Germany, the majority of adult missing persons found dead are male (Keil, 1984). A possible explanation for this gender difference may be the fact that rates of suicide are considerably higher among males than females (Hawton, 2000). Not surprisingly, the likelihood of being found dead increased significantly with age, as shown in Table 15. Some caution is needed with regard to these findings, as the numbers were quite small.

Over half of the cases in the case file sample that resulted in death (36) involved people, mostly men, who had left to commit suicide and were subsequently found dead. Most of those in the case file sample who had committed suicide were in younger or older age groups. Half were aged 18–26 years and this may help to explain the sharp increase in the proportion found dead in early adulthood in Table 15. This is perhaps not surprising, considering that suicide is the second most common cause of death for those under the age of 35 (Department of Health, 1999). Most of the other suicides were aged 56–63 years. As well as those with a known outcome, there were additional cases where suicide was suspected but as yet no body had been found. In most of these cases, the families had some indication that their relative might attempt suicide. Evidence of their vulnerability was often linked to recent periods of depression or to previous attempts or threats of suicide.

In just under one third of cases, the missing person had died as a result of having an accident or coming to harm. Dying as a result of having an accident or otherwise coming to harm were more common among those aged 18–23 years or over 60 years than among any other age group. This may help to explain the relatively high proportion of people in younger and older age groups among those found dead. In many of these cases, their families had some awareness that this was likely to have been the case. In some instances, the age and vulnerability of missing people gave cause for concern. For example, three elderly men suffering from dementia had wandered off from their normal environment. In another case, an elderly woman, who was insulin dependent and feeling unwell, disappeared while out

with her partner. Others who died were people suffering from mental health problems who went missing from institutions such as hospitals. Another three men were found to have died accidentally after being out at night drinking.

Finally, there was just one case of homicide in the case file sample. This concerned a young man, a drug user, who was last seen being chased by several men. For a minority of people who died while missing, however, the death had no connection to the missing episode itself but was simply due to the passage of time. Most of these people had been missing for a number of years, usually as a result of a deliberate decision to break links with their families. In all these cases, the efforts made to trace them only started many years after they had already died.

## Summary

Age and reasons for going missing were key determinants of both outcomes and time missing. The time elapsing before a person is reported missing and the urgency with which police respond to a case are also influential, but these may themselves be influenced by age and reasons for going missing. Teenagers who went missing under the age of 18 and adults who left when over 60 years old were far more likely to be found within six months than all other age groups. Age and reasons for going missing were inextricably interwoven, and their interrelationship is particularly clear when the younger and older groups within the missing population are considered.

While some younger children (under 13 years) ran away, the majority did not become missing intentionally, as most had been separated from a parent or siblings due to parental abduction or because of family breakdown. As a result, the majority of them were missing for many years and were unlikely to return. Adolescents of 13–17 years were most likely to have run away, and the majority of young runaways are found after a relatively short period of time and often return to the place they have left. The same is true for adults who are vulnerable due to mental health problems or dementia, as this group is also more likely to return than the majority of others and tends to remain missing for a short period.

Other adults – mainly those between the ages of 24 and 60 – who went missing due to a breakdown in family relationships or to drifting out of contact were likely to remain missing for considerably longer and were far less likely to return. However, many of those adults in middle adulthood who were missing due to multiple or financial problems returned within a few months, which was unusual for their age group.

Age at going missing was, along with gender, significantly associated with the likelihood of being found dead. Younger men were more likely to go missing in order to commit suicide, while the majority of vulnerable older people found dead were also male.

It is striking that very few people returned after going missing. The majority who did so were young runaways and (mostly older) people with mental health problems or dementia. Although only 20% returned, a further 39% did make some contact with relatives. However, 41% refused all contact once traced, in most cases due to continuing bitterness towards family members, even after many years' absence. While some missing people may have very good reasons for refusing all contact with their families, others may potentially benefit from renewing contact if advice and mediation are available to help them do so.

# 6

## Making connections

The purpose of this study has been to explore the missing phenomenon. An attempt has been made to identify those who go missing, under what circumstances and to understand more about what happens to them when they do. While a considerable amount is known about the experiences of young people, especially with regard to prevalence and patterns of running away, the experiences of adults who go missing has been a sadly neglected area. This chapter will review some of the main themes that have emerged during the course of the report and provide some initial pointers that may help to guide future policy and practice in relation to missing persons, their families and friends.

The study was based on cases that were reported to the NMPH. The findings that have been presented, therefore, cannot address the prevalence of going missing among adults and children. However, the diversity of reports that are received by the NMPH has helped to ensure that, for the first time in the UK, the study has been able to generate valuable insights into the experiences of people across the entire spectrum of missing persons cases.

As has been seen, what it means to be missing is not simple to define. Some people intend to go missing, while others do not. Some people may be reported missing by their families, while they themselves have a different perception of their circumstances. Yet others may drift out of contact with relatives over time, whether or not there is intention on their part. Other people may be forced apart, sometimes by having to leave their homes or by being denied access to their children or other relatives. The concept of 'missing' should therefore embrace all these possible scenarios.

The diverse range of circumstances in which people become missing suggests that there are unlikely to be any simple solutions. The social problems that underpin going missing cut across many policy and service areas and are likely to require interdisciplinary responses. Furthermore, strategies directed at prevention may not always be feasible or even desirable. Adults, in most circumstances, have a right to leave, although some cases will clearly have implications for the welfare, legal or criminal justice systems. For others, flight will be necessary for their personal safety. However, going missing does not just have implications for the missing person but may also cause considerable distress and uncertainty among those left behind.

### Raising public awareness

Initiatives that aim to reduce the impact of going missing need to address a wider audience than just missing persons themselves. This should include the wider public whose attitudes and opinions are likely to affect the support and understanding that families of missing persons can expect to receive.

There is evidence that the families of missing persons often experience stigma and feelings of shame and that, especially in longer-term cases, initial support and sympathy may fade away (Henderson and Henderson, 1998). Raising public awareness about the issues associated with going missing may help to generate greater sensitivity within the community at large, reduce this sense of social isolation felt by many families and make it easier for them to seek help. It may also help to focus attention on the implications of being away, including the risks associated with it,

and on the impact that going missing may have on others. In retrospect, regrets about the suffering that had been caused to family or friends were prominent in the minds of many people in this study. It may therefore encourage people to seek alternative strategies for dealing with their problems and to identify appropriate sources of help.

### **Information about services**

Access to information about local and national services that are available for help and imaginative strategies for publicising them are of critical importance. Adults and young people need signposting to statutory and voluntary services that can assist them with difficulties they may be experiencing before going missing becomes necessary. However, the decision to go missing is not always premeditated, especially among young runaways or those who leave in response to a crisis, and many had no idea where to turn for support. Well publicised information about services that can help with their immediate safety and longer-term needs are also necessary. There is evidence that families may also lack information about support services (Compass Partnership, 2000; Henderson and Henderson, 1998) and, as has been seen, some of those who lost touch with family members or otherwise drifted apart were unaware of action they might take to re-establish a connection.

Considerable progress has already been made by helping agencies in these areas, including use of the media (television, radio and newspapers), the Internet and carton campaigns, to publicise missing persons cases. Although these strategies have a primary focus on tracing missing persons, they may also contribute to raising public awareness of the issue and make it easier for people to seek help. In some instances, this work has been reinforced by the development of education packs for schools and other settings. Use of the media, however, may also be double-edged and may serve to narrow debates about what it means to be missing. Television needs to capture viewers and tends to do this by focusing on those who are vulnerable or missing in otherwise worrying circumstances. It is important that publicity about services encompasses the full spectrum of missing cases.

### **Prevention**

Public awareness of the issues and of the services that are available form part of an overall preventive strategy. Unfortunately, from a research and public policy perspective, missing persons has been a neglected area. While there is a lack of evidence from service evaluations to help guide the development of services, an improved understanding of the range of circumstances in which people become missing can help service providers be more alert to the factors that might prompt it and to those groups that may be at greater risk.

### **Mental and physical health**

Some groups are likely to be at greater risk of going missing than others. In particular, those suffering from depression or other mental health problems, including psychotic illnesses where medication has not been taken, have been identified. These groups are highly vulnerable while they are away and, for some, absences resulted in suicide or accidental death. Where cases resulted in suicide, families had often been aware of this risk at the time they reported them missing. Mental health difficulties may be a background factor in a person's decision to leave linked to other problems in their lives, or their mental health may be directly related to the absence. Some simply wandered away, while others used going missing to retreat from the world and its pressures. Information about the quality of the support services these people received was not available to this study. However, recognition that mental health issues are risk factors for going missing, especially where they cluster with other problems in a person's relationships or wider life, may help to sharpen preventive responses.

Among the older population, conditions that impaired mental functioning led to unintentional absences and were the most common reason for being away for those aged over 60. While it is difficult to gauge the extent to which such absences are preventable, there is a need for particular vigilance, given their acute vulnerability.

### **Family conflict**

A range of circumstances are likely to generate a risk of children and adults being missing. Going missing is more likely at times of stress or fracture in family relationships. Acute or long-term conflicts, often resulting in the breakdown of relationships, accounted for a large proportion of those who decided to leave. Many adults went missing to escape these pressures. Conflicts and arguments with parents represent the primary reason for running away among young people, although around one in four run away to escape abuse or neglect (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999).

Tensions and conflicts within family relationships are inevitable. The outcomes depend largely on the quality of communication within families. Many of those who responded to the follow-up survey suggested that if there had been better communication between family members, if they had been more open about the problems they were experiencing, their absence might have been prevented. Some also emphasised the importance of having access to an independent ear, someone outside the immediate family who could listen to them and offer support. Help of this kind could be provided by a close friend or through access to professional counselling, where such a service is available. Access to counselling at an early point may help to reduce the build-up of tension and enable people to consider alternative strategies for managing their problems. With respect to running away, pilot initiatives have been undertaken in schools, utilising peer counsellors, to help children explore difficulties in their family or personal lives before running away becomes necessary (Rees, 2001). The potential for family group conferencing, which tries to draw on strengths in the wider family network to explore strategies for reconciling family conflict, has also been suggested in this context (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999; Wade, 2002).

### **Family breakdown**

The divorce or separation of parents could lead to children losing touch with other family members or to them being physically abducted by a parent, which was usually linked to disputes over custody or access. Children whose families divide may lose a parent or lose contact with brothers or sisters. Parents may be

prevented from retaining contact after separation or 'choose' not to persist with access arrangements. Loss of contact is common and there is evidence that around one half of non-custodial parents lose touch with their children within two years of separation (Stevenson, 2000). However, studies show that continuing contact with the non-resident parent may benefit children's adjustment following parental separation, provided the quality of that contact is positive and conflict free (Lund, 1984; Rogers and Pryor, 1998). Recognition of the importance of facilitating contact is reflected in the recent consultation undertaken by the Lord Chancellor's Department (Lord Chancellor's Department, 2001). It is clear that, even where relatives are separated for many years, the desire for reconciliation and resumed contact can remain strong. Most adults in this study who were found and put back in touch were happy to be so.

### **Personal crises**

Going missing may be prompted by other crises, including for example, work-related stresses, financial difficulties or the onset of a cluster of problems that prove overwhelming. Absences of this kind raise similar issues to those discussed previously. Where communication with partners or other family members was poor, the effect of these stress factors was increased. Access to advice and support at an early point, both from within and outside the family, may help to defuse tension, encourage a sharing of problems and strengthen a person's ability to cope (McGubbin et al, 1982; McKenry and Price, 2000).

### **Mediation**

The value of mediation services to assist families during divorce or separation has been consistently highlighted. Not only might this help to reduce the risk of children suffering a damaging loss of links, it may also help to prevent subsequent child abductions (Hegar and Greif, 1991; Stevenson, 2000). In addition, mediation may be of help in other contexts that give rise to going missing, for example, in conflicts between parents and their teenage or adult children. Comments from those who had run away or left home as young adults often pointed to the contrasting perspectives held by them and their parents about what constituted acceptable behaviour. The normal process of negotiating boundaries



acceptable to both parties had broken down and parents were often considered too controlling or manipulative. Mediation may be a helpful strategy for drawing together these disparate perspectives and improving communication. In recent years, local authorities have started to respond to these problems through the development of specialist family support services for teenagers that provide crisis intervention and mediation services (Biehal et al, 2000). Services of this kind may have an important role to play in reducing the incidence of going missing.

### **The limits to prevention**

In some circumstances, prevention may not be possible and leaving may be a perfectly rational response to a situation that is perceived as intolerable. Where relationship breakdowns prove irreconcilable, there may be little point in attempts at reconciliation. Some children who run away have experienced serious abuse or neglect and their circumstances will raise clear child protection concerns. Where women have lived with domestic violence, they may feel they have few options other than flight. The need for comprehensive services and better coordination of agencies working to support women experiencing violence has been highlighted in government guidance (Home Office, 1999). For a number of women in this study, the decision to leave also meant losing contact with their children, extended family and friends. Where leaving or running away is linked to abuse or violence, the most desirable outcome may be for the perpetrator to be removed from the household. Where this proves impossible, the best that may be hoped for is that the act of leaving (or, for children, being removed to substitute care) does not involve a complete loss of links and lead to social isolation. In this sense, a person may have left but may not be *missing*. With respect to domestic violence, such a scenario is unlikely to be realistic unless there is swift and adequate support and legal protection available.

### **Reducing the impact of missing episodes**

The majority of adults and young people had been missing for a considerable period of time. Responses to the follow-up survey pointed to both positive and

negative aspects of being away. Where people had decided to leave or had run away, being away often gave them time to think, relief from pressure and, in some instances, the possibility of making a fresh start. However, aspects of being away were also distressing. Many young people felt lonely, hungry or frightened. Among adults, loneliness often interplayed with feelings of guilt, of missing family members and with a loss of support and security.

Being away also carried risks and dangers. Among adults, more than one quarter reported having slept rough. Sleeping rough was not linked to length of time away and certainly not confined to those with transient lifestyles. Over one third reported that they had experienced danger, including physical or sexual assault, and these dangers were closely linked to sleeping rough or stays in hostels. Two fifths of young runaways reported having slept rough and almost one third had stayed with a stranger. Taken together with reports of physical or sexual assault, more than half of young runaways had one or more of these risk factors attached to their time away.

### **Support for missing people**

Those who go missing are likely to have an immediate need for safe shelter, money, food and clothes. Given that the risks associated with sleeping rough are well established (Ballintyne, 1999), it is imperative that services are in place to prevent exposure to the streets. Where the decision to leave is not premeditated, access to safe and supported accommodation may provide space for people to gather their thoughts, receive advice and information and plan their next steps. This may also include re-establishing some direct or indirect contact with those they have left behind.

Provision of a safe refuge is of particular importance to young runaways. Young people under the age of 16 have no legal right to live independently of the care of an adult with parental responsibility and, as such, have no legitimate means for supporting themselves. The literature in this area is replete with evidence about young people's vulnerability (Newman, 1989; Rees, 1993; Stein et al, 1994; Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999). Section 51 of the 1989 Children Act makes provision for the development of refuges, exempt from the laws on harbouring, that can accommodate young people for

up to 14 days while further arrangements are made for their future. However, these provisions have been under-utilised and, at present, only one refuge exists in central London.

Recent evidence also shows that rates of running away are broadly consistent across all four countries of the UK and between city, town and rural areas (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999). It is likely, therefore, that a network of refuge provision would be necessary across the UK to meet the immediate needs of a subgroup of the runaway population where an immediate return home is either unsafe or unfeasible. The intensity of resources required for the residential model may also lead to more flexible lower cost models for delivering emergency accommodation. The development of effective strategies for delivering intensive short-term support, including counselling and mediation, and linked to emergency accommodation, are currently being considered by the Social Exclusion Unit as part of its review of services for runaways (Social Exclusion Unit, 2001). There is some evidence that outreach projects and drop-in centres can provide a helpful response to the immediate needs of young runaways who are on the streets (Stein et al, 1994; Rees, 2001).

Where the decision to leave is permanent, many adults will also need longer-term assistance to help them rebuild their lives. In addition to the immediate needs for shelter, food and money, assistance may be required to find a permanent home or new employment. Leaving home may involve a loss of social support and carry a risk of social isolation. Access to appropriate community health and mental health services are also likely to be issues for a significant minority of the missing population. Where advice, information and support in these areas had been provided, people were generally appreciative. However, some reported difficulties accessing services or dissatisfaction with the quality of services they received and felt that this had affected their ability to re-stabilise their lives, especially where they were experiencing problems with their mental health.

### **Support for families**

Some missing people, even where they had no intention to return, still harboured concerns for their families. Some adults and young people expressed a

desire to communicate to their families that they were safe and well, even though they may not have wanted to do this directly. A need to know what has happened to the missing person is also a pressing concern for their families (Henderson and Henderson, 1998). Services that can facilitate this basic communication, such as that provided by the Message Home Helpline, may reduce the time that a missing person is out of contact and help to alleviate the worst fears of their family and friends.

Once a person goes missing their families are likely to have a range of support needs. A primary need of families is for practical search assistance from the police or from other agencies that can help with tracing the missing person (Henderson and Henderson, 1998). However, the absence may create other effects, especially if it is not resolved quickly. Feelings of worry, confusion, anger, guilt and loss are likely to be pervasive in the immediate aftermath of a missing episode. It may also generate difficulties in family dynamics, for example, in the relationship between the remaining parent and their children (Payne, 1995). Where family or community supports are weak or, in longer-term cases, where initial support ebbs away, families may feel socially isolated. Families may also need help to adjust to the reality that their loved one may be missing for a long time and that they may not return. A missing incident may also have further financial or legal implications, for example, in cases where the missing person is the main earner or with respect to legal property rights (Henderson and Henderson, 1998).

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

practical and emotional support, especially in longer-term cases.

A family's first port of call is usually the police. The police have first responsibility for receiving reports and initiating appropriate investigations, which are likely to vary according to the perceived level of risk attached to the absence (Newiss, 1999). Where a report is likely to have a low priority, it is important that families are referred effectively to other agencies that can assist with tracing. The police also have responsibility for maintaining the liaison with families throughout the progress of missing persons cases. Where this liaison is effective, families tend to be very positive. However, some families have also raised concerns about the quality of subsequent communication. Where this is poor, it can heighten feelings of distress and uncertainty (Henderson and Henderson, 1998). In more serious cases, police forces may allocate Family Liaison Officers to maintain links with and support families until there is a known outcome. It may be that further initiatives in this area would have considerable benefits for families at what is an acutely stressful time in their lives.

## Reconciliation and return

The likelihood of return relates to the length of time missing and to the reasons for being away. Those away for a shorter time were more likely to return. This was particularly the case for young runaways and those aged over 60 whose absences were unintentional. Return may not always be a feasible or desired option. Those who refused further contact tended to feel a continuing anger or bitterness about past events or, where violence had been involved, harboured concerns about the repercussions that renewed contact might bring. In other circumstances, where loss of contact had been long term, the possibilities for reconciliation and contact appeared more positive.

Where families drift apart, are separated or lose touch for other reasons, the study has highlighted the valuable role played by agencies that undertake social tracing. Even after many years of separation, once they had been found, the majority welcomed the opportunity to reconnect with other family members. Services of this kind are provided by a

variety of agencies that undertake searches within the UK and overseas. Publicity and access are important issues. Some people who responded to the follow-up survey had spent several years without knowing that help might be available, or that members of their family were seeking them. Others, despite a desire for reconciliation, confessed that they were wary or lacked the courage to take a first step. If these services had a higher profile with the public, and if access was made easier, it might overcome some of these problems.

Apprehension was a common feeling among missing people. Most of those who returned or renewed contact had concerns about how their families would receive them. Many expressed fears about whether their families would accept them, about coping with their family's feelings of anger or disappointment in them and about facing up to the problems that led them to leave. In most cases, an initial contact with a family member persuaded them to return. Communication was sometimes direct or was mediated through the NMPH. Brokering and mediation may therefore be an important link in the chain leading to reconciliation. A similar service is provided by the Message Home Helpline, although the profile of its callers suggests that, at present, it is primarily used by young people away from home (Mitchell, 2003). Services such as these have an important role in enabling missing people to communicate that they are safe and well, allowing them to explore whether a direct approach to their families would be welcomed and in bringing parties together where this is wanted. Given the concerns of adult missing people, it is likely that the service provided by Message Home would be as helpful to them as it is to young people.

As has been seen, the decision to leave usually reflects the existence of deeper problems in the missing person's family relationships, work environment or in other aspects of their personal lives. When a missing person is found, there is considerable potential for follow-up. With respect to young runaways, studies have consistently advocated the need for independent follow-up interviews when a young person returns (Abrahams and Mungall, 1992; Rees, 1993; Wade and Biehal, 1998; Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999). Missing persons' schemes have been developed for young runaways in recent years (see Rees, 2001). These schemes work closely with the

police and, once a young person has returned, approach them and sometimes their parents, to explore whether and what forms of further support can be offered. In some cases, this initial response may be sufficient to help families to resolve the situation, while in others it may provide a foundation for further counselling or mediation. This kind of response may also have application to adults where return or renewed contact occurs. It may help the process of reconciliation and help to link missing persons and their families to services that can address any wider problems they may be experiencing.

## **A coordinated response**

Despite the best efforts of agencies working in the field, the missing persons issue continues to have a relatively low public profile, especially where adults are concerned. Yet the issues it raises have wide resonance and cut across a range of social policy areas – including the family, education, the police, health and social care. At present, there is no overall strategy to ensure the integration of policies and services for missing persons. As the Compass Partnership (2000) review makes clear, there has been a lack of clear policy direction, limited awareness of the respective roles of key agencies and inconsistent procedures for responding to the issue. It might also be added that, as yet, little is known about the scale of the problem.

## **National data**

At present, there are no reliable estimates of the scale of the missing persons problem in the UK. An understanding of the prevalence of going missing and of how rates may vary in different areas is essential for framing effective policies and services, even though this is not a straightforward task. There is evidence that police practice in accepting, recording and classifying missing persons reports varies within and between local constabularies (Newiss, 1999). Furthermore, not all cases are reported to the police. For example, where assistance is required for tracing relatives missing for many years, families may approach voluntary agencies directly. Others may be reluctant to approach the police.

There is no single comprehensive database of missing persons at this moment in the UK. The PNMPB accepts missing persons reports from the police. This

database, however, only includes incidents lasting longer than 14 days, mostly in relation to ‘vulnerable’ cases and there is some variability in the extent to which police forces forward information (Compass Partnership, 2000). The NMPH accepts a broader range of cases, including those considered non-vulnerable, but is also incomplete since not all families approach the agency for assistance.

The Compass Partnership, in its review of the respective roles of national missing persons agencies, recommended the development of improved arrangements for information sharing between the PNMPB and NMPH in order to create a more comprehensive national database, including both vulnerable and non-vulnerable missing persons cases. This would represent a significant step forward and would facilitate investigation, the exchange of information across agencies and provide more accurate statistics for monitoring and research. However, while this would be an important step, it would still be likely to underestimate the true extent of the problem. For instance, a majority of running away incidents tend to be very short term, involving one night away or less, and many of these cases would be unlikely to appear in the statistics (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999).

## **A national lead**

The missing persons issue requires a coordinated response from central government to provide policy direction and to ensure that the needs of missing persons are properly reflected in initiatives made by government departments. In addition, the development of national and local forums that draw together statutory and voluntary agencies with an interest in this area can help to raise the profile of the issue, promote consistent responses and exchange information concerning best practice. Some encouraging steps are already being taken. The national consultation exercise recently undertaken by the Social Exclusion Unit on the needs of young runaways may lead to the development of a national policy and service framework for this group (Social Exclusion Unit, 2001). The Department of Health has issued guidance to local authorities on strategies for managing the problem of young people who go missing from care (Biehal and Wade, 2002; DoH, 2002). With respect to the missing persons issue as a whole, the Home Office is now taking a lead in

establishing a cross departmental group, including relevant government departments together with other partners, to explore a way forward. Finally, in response to the Compass Partnership review, the Association of Chief Police Officers is undertaking a review of the role and responsibilities of the police with respect to missing persons and of the interface of this role with that of other agencies, such as the NMPH. This will lead to further guidance in the near future.

### **Working together**

The importance of working together has been a central strand in government policy initiatives. The broad range of social problems that lead people to be missing suggests that many agencies, operating in different fields, are likely to encounter people who are missing or are at risk of becoming so. A partnership approach and positive communication between agencies are therefore essential for an effective response. These may include the development of appropriate formal joint initiatives, such as those that have emerged in work with young runaways. Missing persons schemes, for example, depend on formal cooperation between the police, social services and voluntary agencies. In many areas, formal protocols have been developed to coordinate more effectively the response of the police and social services to runaway incidents, especially with respect to those from care (see Local Government Association and the Association of Chief Police Officers, 1997). It may be that initiatives of this kind could have a wider application in the missing persons field.

The primary aim of this study, however, has been to explore the dimensions of the missing problem. In doing so, the authors have attempted to identify those groups that may be at risk of becoming missing and the circumstances that make going missing more likely. The implications of going missing, for the missing person themselves and for their family and friends, have also been explored. A better understanding of the issues for missing people should help practitioners in a wide range of agencies to be more alert to warning signs, to recognise who may be missing among their client group and to be more sensitive to what being missing may mean for all concerned. Furthermore, an improved awareness can only help service providers, of whatever kind, to

situate the services they offer a missing person in the wider context of their lives. Since those who go missing may have lost links with their wider kinship network and be isolated and apprehensive about renewing contact, viewing their needs in a rounded way and helping them to make connections – to other services they may need or to significant people in their lives – may be one of the more valuable services that can be provided.

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# A

## Appendix A: National Missing Persons Helpline

The National Missing Persons Helpline charity offers support to the families of missing people, and also traces missing people and attempts to reunite them with their families, if they so wish.

The charity offers a variety of services. It operates two separate freephone helplines:

- *The National Missing Persons Helpline* (NMPH): a national 24-hour helpline providing support, assistance and practical advice to families of missing persons.
- *The Message Home Helpline*: a national 24-hour helpline for those who have left home or who have run away to send a message home and/or obtain confidential help and advice.

The work of the NMPH has a wider remit than that of the police. It handles cases where people may have drifted apart over the years alongside more 'typical' missing persons cases. Therefore, in addition to searching for those who have suddenly disappeared, it has a social tracing function. Reports originate from families or health and social care professionals directly reporting a person missing to the NMPH, or from referrals made by police forces where there is particular concern and/or a need for publicity.

The NMPH will normally take a report of anyone considered missing by a relative, although there are some exceptions. The NMPH will not accept reports made by anyone under the age of 18, will not search for someone solely because they are wanted for arrest or where it appears someone has left following marital breakdown and there is no other reason for concern. The NMPH will not search for alleged fathers or attempt to make contact with

children under the age of 18 who are known to be safe (that is, living with the other parent).

Staff and volunteers attempt to trace the people reported missing, conduct searches on behalf of families and seek to publicise cases through a range of different methods. Various television companies, Teletext, national newspapers and magazines provide space to publicise missing cases. The NMPH distributes posters focusing on individual cases. They then follow-up on any reported sightings.

The NMPH works closely with police forces throughout the country. A number of police forces have signed individual protocols with the NMPH and have designated liaison officers who communicate with staff and volunteers within the agency. The NMPH aims to support the police in their role as the principal agency responsible for locating the whereabouts of missing people.

# Appendix B:

## Methodology of the study

The research design incorporated three components, drawing on three (sometimes overlapping) samples, which are outlined below. From the data analysis of the three samples, the authors aimed to establish a baseline profile of missing persons reported to the NMPH and, subsequently, to construct a typology of the characteristics and circumstances of different groups who go missing.

### **Database study**

The database sample comprised all cases opened and all cases closed in the 12-month period immediately preceding the commencement of the study (1 October 1999 to 30 September 2000). This resulted in a sample of 1,915 cases. Repeat cases were excluded from the analysis (only the later incident was included in the study), leaving a sample of 1,873 people. Within this sample, there were 1,611 people newly reported missing and 1,279 people found during the year. Of the 1,279 found, 1,156 were found alive and 123 were found to have died.

Data documenting these cases were collected from the agency's main database. This database included a range of information that documented the progression of a case, including details of the physical appearance and main characteristics of the missing person, the circumstances under which they went missing, any police details and information on press and publicity work. However, as the database was designed for finding missing people rather than for research purposes, there were limitations on what could be used for the study.

Nevertheless, sufficient data were available to compile a simple profile of the missing person population

with reference to their main demographic characteristics. The age used for the purpose of analysis was the age at which people were reported to have gone missing, rather than their current age. Using this, it was possible to calculate time missing for closed cases. Details of the outcome of missing episodes (returned, renewed contact, refused contact or dead) were also available on the database.

### **Case file study**

A subsequent sample of 387 cases was randomly selected from the original database sample, as shown in Table 1, Chapter Two. The database sample was stratified by four different age groups and by ethnic origin, from which 354 cases were randomly selected. A random sub-sample of 33 cases where people had been found dead was also included, stratified by age. The random selection of these cases enabled the generalisation of findings to the wider database sample.

As a result of random sampling, five cases of parental abduction were included in the case file sample. As the authors wished to explore this issue as fully as possible, the case files on all *additional* cases of parental abduction recorded on the NMPH main database (that is, those not randomly selected for the case file sample) were also analysed qualitatively, although they were not included in subsequent quantitative analysis of case file data ( $n=13$ ). In total, 18 cases of parental abduction were therefore available for analysis, all but one of them involving children who had gone missing under the age of 12.

A research instrument was designed to collect the information recorded by the NMPH workers in the

**Table 16: Structure of case file sample**

	Under 18s	18-24	25-54	55+	Total
White	65	60	61	74	260
Asian	13	14	14	2*	43
Black	12	14	14	11*	51
Subtotal	90	88	89	87	354
Dead	3	10	10	10	33
Total	93	98	99	97	387

\*Total number of cases available

detailed paper case files. The information recorded on these case files included any information that the remaining family members associated with a disappearance, together with detail gathered throughout the case and any further information that emerged at the closure of the case. Where missing people had been found, case files sometimes included an account from the formerly missing person or additional evidence indicative of the reasons a person had been reported missing (for example, being found dead). This data allowed the authors to identify the reasons people were reported missing and to construct a typology of missing episodes.

### Follow-up sample

A follow-up survey of all cases within the database sample where the missing person had been found alive was undertaken in an attempt to capture accounts of going missing from the perspective of those who had gone missing. Two questionnaires were constructed, one adapted to young people (going missing under 18) and one for adults who had been reported missing.

The authors aimed to include in the follow-up sample all missing persons who had been found alive; a total of 1,156 people. This proved to be difficult, as the records kept on the closure of a case often did not have any contact details for the person who had been found. In most cases, the only way of reaching the missing person was to contact the person, most often a family member, who had originally reported them missing to the NMPH.

In total, 367 formerly missing people were traced. However, 42 refusals to participate were received, either from the missing person themselves or their families, while making efforts to clarify postal contact details. In the end, postal questionnaires were sent to 325 people who had recently been missing, inviting them to give their own accounts of their circumstances, motivations and experiences. A total of 114 questionnaires were returned.

The follow-up survey represents the first attempt to enable missing persons to provide their own accounts of going missing. While the authors do not claim that this is a representative sample of missing people, these accounts do provide valuable indicators of the circumstances, motivations and experiences of people who go missing for those who are reported to the NMPH.

Since the patterns for age, gender and ethnic origin (shown in Tables 17 and 18) are broadly consistent in most respects across the database and follow-up samples, the authors have some confidence that other characteristics identified in the follow-up sample may be generalisable to the wider population reported to the NMPH each year.

The proportion of respondents in each of the adult age groups was broadly similar to the proportions in

**Table 17: Comparing the age and gender of database and follow-up samples**

Age	Total	% Database (n=1,599)		Total	% Follow-up (n=114)	
		Male	Female		Male	Female
Under 18	22	35	65	35	28	73
18-23	15	63	37	18	48	52
24-30	22	72	28	16	72	28
31-59	36	74	26	29	70	30
60 +	6	74	26	2	0	100

the main database sample. The main difference was in the over 60 age group. Only two questionnaires were received from people aged 60 years and over, so the authors are unable to comment on patterns for this age group in the follow-up survey. The follow-up sample includes a higher proportion of people who had gone missing before the age of 18 than the main database sample, but as the circumstances of adults and young people are discussed separately, this does not pose any problems.

The pattern for ethnic origin in the follow-up sample was also broadly similar to that in the main database sample. The main difference was the higher proportion of people of mixed ethnic origin who returned follow-up questionnaires. Consistent with the main database sample, white respondents are fairly evenly distributed across age groups, whereas the majority of minority ethnic respondents went missing when under the age of 18 years.

## Data analysis

### Statistical analysis

Statistical analysis of data from all three components of the study was undertaken. Given the nature of the data, non-parametric tests were mainly used. A variety of bivariate non-parametric tests were used, including Chi-square, Mann-Whitney, Kruskal-Wallis and Kendall's tau b. Some multivariate analysis was carried out using log-linear modelling and logistic regression.

With regard to the large database sample, findings were considered statistically significant where the p value was less than .01 (confidence level of 99%). For the smaller case file and follow-up samples, the threshold for statistical significance was .05 (confidence level of 95%).

**Table 18: Comparing ethnic origin of database and follow-up samples**

Ethnic origin	% Database (n=1,534)	% Follow-up (n=112)
White	86	88
Black	7	5
Asian	5	3
Mixed origin	1	5

### Qualitative analysis

Data from the paper case files and the postal questionnaires from the follow-up survey were entered onto separate Access databases. Initial coding of qualitative data from the case files involved breaking the data into units of analysis based on a priori codes, which were developed on the basis of discussions with NMPH staff, non-participant observation of the agency by one of the researchers over a one-year period, and analysis of the very limited body of literature available. These initial codings were reformulated through a process of analytic induction, whereby provisional categories were refined as more cases were analysed. Cases already examined were then scrutinised again, in order to ascertain whether it was appropriate to include them in the reformulated categories (Silverman, 1993).

Following this lengthy coding process, data from the case files were analysed thematically, to explore qualitatively the associations between different types of motivation and age, gender and ethnic origin. This thematic analysis led to the development of a typology of missing episodes and of hypotheses about the links between different reasons for going missing and different patterns of absence, in terms of the duration of missing episodes and their outcomes.

A similar analysis of data from the follow-up survey was then undertaken. This analysis of the accounts of missing people themselves allowed the authors to test the coding categories and the developing typology, while at the same time remaining alert to the possibility of modifying it on the basis of any new evidence from the follow-up survey. However, it was discovered that the motivations described by respondents in the follow-up survey were entirely consistent with the typology developed during the analysis of the case file sample. The follow-up survey also provided rich qualitative data that helped to make sense of the patterns identified in both the database survey and the case file analysis.

Qualitative analysis was therefore used not only to explore motivations, experiences and outcomes, but also to interrogate the patterns identified in the statistical analysis and as a basis for further statistical analysis.





