

INTRODUCTION

The nature, number and outcomes of missing incidents.

Many thousands of people go missing every year in the UK. In 2011-12, British police forces recorded 313,000 missing person incidents, relating to around 192,000 individual people (UK Missing Persons Bureau, 2013: 5). People of all ages and from every walk of life go missing. The most recent police data available show that men account for slightly more missing person reports than women (52 per cent compared to 48 per cent overall) but that, in the 12 to 17 years age group, young women account for a higher proportion of reports than young men (56 per cent compared to 44 per cent) (UK Missing Persons Bureau, 2013: 15-16).

Most police missing person incidents are resolved very quickly; usually within one or two days. Police data suggest that 89 per cent of missing person incidents are resolved in some way within 48 hours, and 70 per cent within 16 hours (UK Missing Persons Bureau, 2013: 26). This is comparable with the experience overseas (Henderson and Henderson, 1998; James, Anderson and Putt, 2008, National Crime Information Center, 2011; New Zealand Police, 2013). Very few missing person incidents end with the death of the missing individual; research findings from the UK and elsewhere show that less than one per cent of police missing person investigations have a fatal outcome (Newiss, 1999; Tarling and Burrows, 2004; Newiss, 2006, Hirschel and Lab, 1998).

Many people are also believed to go missing without being reported to the police, and it is difficult to estimate the number of these unreported missing people. One such group is young people who run away from home or care; research suggests that as many as two thirds of young people who run away are not reported missing to the police (Rees, 2011). Many people who have lost touch with their families are also searched for; for many families in this position it is not necessary or appropriate to contact the police, but their family member is still considered missing. Many families in this situation use publicly available online resources to undertake their searches, meaning that they are not counted by any agency.

MISSING PEOPLE

Missing People is a UK charity that searches for missing people, supports those left behind, and provides 24/7 advice and support directly to missing children and adults.

Search and publicity services

The Missing People website features missing person appeals, which are also circulated via the charity's social media profiles to more than 90,000 followers. The charity has a national network of partners who can display appeal posters, and a number of media partners who run regular appeals, while Appeal Days circulate appeals for missing people in local areas. All appeals feature the charity's phone number, 116 000, through which members of the public can provide sightings and information. The charity is also a partner in Child Rescue Alert, which is a coordinated emergency response to high risk missing children. Missing People maintains a network of Support Partners comprising service providers who may encounter missing people accessing their service, and these partners receive appeals and guidance on addressing clients' missing status. By using Missing People's TextSafe service, police investigators can request the charity to send a text message to be sent to the missing person from the charity, in order to alert them to the charity's services.

Family support services

Families of missing people can access the charity's services 24/7, via the free, confidential 116 000 phone, text and email channels. The charity provides advice and signposting as well as emotional support. As well as supporting reconnections, the charity can provide dedicated family support workers, telephone counselling, the online Family Connect forum and a range of online guidance leaflets. Missing People also organises a number of events where families can come together, including annual carol services and a Family Conference. Families are also able to access the charity's family tracing services, to locate relatives who have lost contact.

Services for missing children and adults

Missing People provides a 24/7 free, confidential helpline via telephone (to 116 000), text message (to 116 000) and email (to 116000@missingpeople.org.uk). Through these channels the charity can provide advice to callers, including signposting them to local services, as well as emotional support. Missing People can pass messages back and forth between callers and their family or carers, and can facilitate three-way conference calls or referrals to other service providers.

Missing People is able to accept out-of-hours calls diverted from local projects, enabling their users to access support around the clock. Missing People also provides a wide range of online guidance for missing children and adults. New services that are under development include an After Missing support service to be piloted in Wales in 2015, and the Wiltshire and Swindon service which will provide return interviews for previously missing and absent children and ongoing support for those at most risk.

MISSING PEOPLE: A YEAR IN NUMBERS

In 2011, Missing People had contact with 1,622 missing people via phone, text and email

- 56% female, 44% male (where sex was known)
- 68% under 18yrs, 32% over 18yrs (where age was known)
- 29% phone calls, 23% emails, 22% text messages, 26% TextSafe messages
- 21% of contacts resulted in a reconnection

In 2011, Missing People supported 690 police vulnerable missing person investigations

- 40% female, 60% male
- 34% under 18yrs, 66% over 18yrs
- 64% found alive, 10% found deceased, 19% still missing two years later

In 2011, Missing People opened tracing searches for 245 missing adults who had lost contact with their families

- 32% female, 68% male
- 64% of tracing searches opened more than a year after the person lost contact
- 40% found alive within a year, 1% found to have died, 60% still missing a year later²

Over four years' of annual Family Feedback Surveys, Missing People has gathered feedback from 662 family members of missing people

- 62% of respondents said their missing relative had been found alive, of whom...
 - 26% had returned to live with their family
 - 36% had resumed face-to-face contact
 - 22% had resumed correspondence contact
 - 16% had not resumed contact with their family

DEFINING KEY TERMS

This report will explore the ways in which people get back in contact (reconnect) with family, carers or appropriate support organisations after being missing. In this context it is important to define what it means to be missing. In this study, ‘missing people’ includes those who have been reported to the police as missing and those who have left their habitual residence but who have not been reported to the police or any other agency. They are people who are, or who feel, disconnected from their support network, from their habits and usual places, and even from themselves.

For someone to stop being missing, they must be back in contact or reconnected to someone, be that an individual or an organisation. This report seeks to explore the ways in which a range of missing people are reconnected with family, carers, support agencies or a place of safety. The term ‘reconnection’ encompasses a range of potential outcomes for missing people, including a return home to live with their family or carers, contact with search and support agencies (such as the police or social services) or other safe places (such as hospitals or hostels), or a long-lost family member being traced and passing a message to their family. Reconnection does not require direct contact between the missing person and their family, but may be brokered through a third party. Nor does reconnection require that the missing person resumes contact with everyone who is searching. Finally, reconnection may not be permanent as a reconnected person may go missing again; police force data suggest that, on average, 39 per cent of missing incidents are attributable to people who have been missing more than once (UK Missing Persons Bureau, 2013: 13).

“To reconnect people in a safe way is to do it in a supportive way, I think. You know, to do it in a way where you are just sort of with them. Almost kind of holding their hand a bit. You are letting them know that it is not just them, they are not alone in having to deal with this.”

(Missing People staff member, project interviewee)

Reasons for and aims of the study

Until now, much research about missing people has focused on what is described in Figure 1 below as the primary phase: the time between the missing person being reported missing and subsequently being found. Research has focussed, in particular, on what happens to people whilst away, what happens to the families left behind and on the effectiveness of different search strategies (such as, but not limited to, Biehal et al, 2003; Rees et al, 2005; Gibb and Woolnough, 2007; Holmes, 2008). Some research has also been conducted into the characteristics of missing people, and there has also been some work done to examine causes of missing incidents, with a particular focus on preventing future incidents (e.g. Bartholomew et al, 2009). To date, very little attention has been paid to the means and impacts of reconnection and what happens when the missing person is found (the secondary phase in Figure 1)

Research into these issues is much needed in order to understand better the reconnection process, which can be a challenging and distressing time, as well as a time of happiness and relief. This research is also needed to ensure that support services for formerly missing people and their families are developed and designed to meet their needs effectively.

Figure 1: The cycle of missing



As well as the experience of a missing incident itself, the events that follow the missing incident are also likely to have an impact on the reconnected person's wellbeing and that of the other people affected by the disappearance. The period after reconnection also presents opportunities: to put in place interventions to reduce the likelihood of that person going missing again; to undertake safeguarding work to reduce the risk should they go missing again; to find ways to change the pattern of any future missing incidents (e.g. reduce the duration, distance travelled etc.); and to inform future investigations by gathering intelligence about the incident.

This research aims to explore the various ways in which people can be reconnected, and the different outcomes that can result. Each section of the Findings chapter begins with a case study, and then explores relevant issues and themes before making recommendations for change.

METHODOLOGY

This project has used a number of data collection methods to meet the central research aims:

- To explore the ways in which Missing People supports missing people to reconnect with a place of safety
- To examine and outline the characteristics of the reconnection process (e.g. duration, method and outcome)
- To identify key areas for improvement and enhancement of Missing People services
- To make recommendations for further research and policy

The research was conducted using a mixed methods approach. Initially, cases from Missing People's database were coded and counted according to characteristics and outcome. 2,557 cases were included; all the cases opened by the charity in the calendar year 2011. The sample includes vulnerable missing person cases where the police were involved, family tracing cases and contacts made to the charity's helpline by missing children and adults. A subsample of 474 cases which had involved a reconnection were analysed in more depth.

In order to identify the key themes and recommendations, a joint prospective and retrospective case study approach was taken. Using the findings of the quantitative analysis, a number of composite case studies were created, which form the illustrative examples at the beginning of each section of the Findings chapter. The case studies that appear below are composites, but are all based on characteristics of real cases the charity has worked on. The details have been changed to retain the anonymity of our service users and partner agencies.

In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 staff members at Missing People, who work in a supervisory role on the helpline, as well as four family members of formerly missing people. Informal scoping telephone conversations were held with three members of staff from Tracing Partner agencies, and a formal interview with one.

Finally, new analysis was conducted on data from four years of annual Family Feedback Surveys (Missing People 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014a). Each annual survey samples families who have accessed Missing People's services in the previous calendar year. The analysis for this report has combined data from four years of the survey, comprising 662 responses.

2. FINDINGS

For some missing people, being reconnected represents the beginning of a new phase – one that may be difficult. It is likely that return will be a time of questions, silences, happiness and worry. Two key themes were identified in analysis across several case studies: fear that the returned missing person might become missing again; and families’ uncertainty about how much to ask about the missing experience.

“It’s about to repeat itself”

When a missing person is found, families may experience a range of emotions. Alongside relief, some family members may have residual frustration towards the reconnected person. As described in Holmes (2008), some family members of missing people feel anxiety, anger and guilt during a missing incident. While the relief of return may overshadow less positive feelings, it is still possible for family members to feel resentment about what they have experienced, and distrust of the returned person.

“My son said he didn’t realise he had been missing that long. After I hugged him, I said ‘I just want to knock your bloody head off’.”

(Parent of a formerly missing adult, Family Feedback Survey 2013 participant)

“Although they, sort of, love [the reconnected person], in a way they dislike him because he’s caused them grief.”

(Parent of a formerly missing adult, project interviewee)

A missing person’s return, while welcomed, may not mean that they will remain in contact. Families may be concerned that the missing person is at risk of going missing again and, indeed, a significant proportion of missing people (mostly young people) do go missing more than once (Shalev Greene and Hayden, 2014; UK Missing Persons Bureau, 2013).

Even after the first missing incident, for some families there is a lack of trust in the returned person, and fear that they may go missing again. This study found marked concern among families that it would not take much to cause the returned person to go missing again. For some families, this impression may last for many years, as observed by Payne (1995) in an exploration of calls to the charity Missing People (formerly National Missing Persons Helpline) (Payne, 1995: 344).

“If he went up the road you’d think ‘Is he coming back?’ I think a lot of it is like learning to trust them again. That they’re not just going to go out the door and not come back, you know, and that takes a bit of time to rebuild.”

(Sibling of a formerly missing adult, project interviewee)

“Shall I talk about it then?”

Family members, and indeed formerly missing people, may find it difficult to talk about the missing incident. For some, this means not knowing what to say or how to frame conversations to avoid upsetting or angering the returned person. For some it means deliberately avoiding certain subjects or questions, or being very aware of not pushing the returned person to talk.

“There’s so many things you want to ask, but you know you can’t ask them all at once and, you know, it’s even things like where they’ve been living away, and how they’ve been living for that period of time, and then coming back, integrating into the normal life again, if you like. It’s very, very difficult.”

(Sibling of a formerly missing adult, project interviewee)

“Well, in a lot of situations [reconnection] is where the hard work can begin. [...] When they do come back it can be like having a stranger in your house. And, you know, obviously your whole manner changes because you think ‘Have I said the right thing? Can we talk about it now?’”

(Missing People staff member, project interviewee)

A key feature of families’ experience of having a missing relative is the ambiguity of not knowing where they are or what they have experienced. This type of loss may be described as ‘ambiguous loss’; the sense of closure and acceptance that can follow a bereavement may never be reached, and the uncertainty about whether the person is alive or dead means that families can feel unable to recover (Boss, 1999, 2002, 2007; Holmes, 2008).

Following a reconnection some sense of closure is achieved because families know that the formerly missing person is alive and they may have information about their wellbeing. However, if the reconnected person chooses not to share what happened to them whilst missing, while the family may also fear to ask many questions, families may be left with a sense of ongoing ambiguity that may affect relationships between family members and the reconnected person.

This outcome is reflected in Stevenson et al (2013), which reports interviews with returned adults who described finding it difficult to talk about their experience of being missing: “I feel suffocated being here and not being able to talk about my experiences with my husband or anyone really, it’s not something you can talk about” (Stevenson et al, 2013: 96).

The remainder of this section of the report is organised into six case studies, each one a composite based on real cases the charity has worked on. Following each case study is an examination of relevant issues, findings from the research and recommendations.