

# BLACK

# &

# MISSING

A toolkit for identifying and challenging bias in police responses to Black and Black mixed heritage missing people

**UNDERSTANDING THE INTERSECTION OF ETHNICITY AND NEURODIVERSITY, AND THE LINKS WITH GOING MISSING**

There is a real lack of research around the links between neurodiversity and going missing, but experience from frontline practitioners, including Missing People's support services, suggests that being neurodiverse can significantly increase the risk of someone going missing. Both autism and ADHD in particular are regularly mentioned in connection with both children and adults going missing. People who have been missing themselves, and families of missing people, often speak about how both conditions, and a lack of effective support around them, have contributed to why someone has gone missing, and have an effect on what they do and the risks they face while they are away.

Black neurodiverse people may face additional barriers, challenges or discrimination due to the intersection of multiple marginalised elements of their identity. This may in turn compound risks associated with missing.

[Research from 2021](#) found that Black boys in the UK are diagnosed with Autism at similar rates to their White peers, but receive far less educational support. These issues were even more pronounced for Black girls, who were less likely than boys to get a diagnosis, and less likely to get support.

There can also be challenges within families and communities in understanding and accepting neurodiversity. Research commissioned by Impact on Urban Health heard experiences from both parents and professionals who saw the impact of stigma and misunderstanding about neurodiversity in Black and mixed heritage children and families: [Impact on Urban Health](#).

It is important for professionals working with missing people to consider intersectionality, and how this might escalate the risks for some children and adults. For example, both being Black, and having special educational needs, raise the likelihood of being excluded from school: being both just increases the risk further<sup>1</sup>. In turn, school exclusion increases the risk of going missing, and may also be linked to experiencing more serious harm while missing<sup>2</sup>. These elements of a person's identity cannot be considered in isolation, and we should consider risk assessments and offers of support within the knowledge of systemic barriers and bias that each missing person might be facing.

[This blog](#) from [Tumi Sotire](#), a leading advocate on intersectionality within neurodiversity, explores the intersection of neurodiversity, ethnicity and socioeconomic status. Importantly he shares that *"Racial discrimination compounds the challenges faced by neurodivergent individuals, who may be hesitant to disclose their neurodivergence due to fear of additional discrimination or bias."* And highlights the importance of professionals thinking about these issues: *"By considering the intersection of race, class, and neurodivergence, we can work toward a more equitable society—one that ensures no one is left behind, regardless of their background or identity."*

While we absolutely do not expect the police to address the underlying systemic issues discussed here, we just ask that you consider intersectionality in your practice, and think about the ways that someone's identity and experiences might compound to increase risk.

1 [The double-discrimination black autistic children face in education | Ambitious about Autism](#)

2. [N8 Policing Research Partnership | "Too risky yet not risky enough" - New research on seriously harmed missing children](#)

**Words from a previously missing young person about misconceptions in the identification of neurodiversity, and the importance of being flexible to people's individual needs:**

*When police officers are responding to missing Black children and adults, they may notice behaviours that are often misunderstood. Avoiding eye contact, shutting down, or refusing to speak can be seen as being uncooperative, when this may actually reflect autistic shutdown, anxiety, or a trauma response. Agitation, pacing, shouting, or behaviour described as "rudeness" may be panic, sensory overload, a meltdown or PTSD all of which increase the risk of escalation and the person going missing again if handled harshly.*

*Inconsistent stories, confusion, or forgetfulness are often read as dishonesty, but may be linked to dissociation, trauma, learning disability, psychosis, or exhaustion. Over-friendly behaviour, excessive trusting of strangers or people-pleasing may reflect ADHD impulsivity or trauma responses and can significantly increase vulnerability to exploitation while missing. Slow processing or not responding to name may relate to auditory processing differences or shutdown but is often misinterpreted as defiance. Repetitive movements (such as hair twisting or skin picking) may be stimming. Flat affect or appearing "unbothered" can reflect shock, depression, or dissociation which can lead to risk being underestimated.*

*Historically, research into autism and ADHD has focused primarily on white, heterosexual, cisgender boys and men. As a result, diagnostic criteria were built around white male presentation. This means Black children and adults are less likely to be recognised as neurodivergent and their behaviours are more likely to be misinterpreted as defiance, attitude, aggression or criminality rather than distress.*

*In missing incidents, this matters because neurodivergence and mental ill-health often influence why someone goes missing, how they behave while missing and how they respond to police contact when located or returned home.*

*Autistic people who are not white, heterosexual cis males are more likely to have intense interests that are socially acceptable, trend-based, or shorter lived. Communication style can be confusing to others they may appear shy at times and overly direct at others. Masking is common and often unconscious. The ongoing stress of masking can lead to anxiety and overwhelm. Many autistic people manage this throughout the school or workday, only to experience meltdowns or shutdowns once they are back in a safe space. This is particularly relevant in missing cases, as distress may not appear until after the person has been located or returned home.*

*It is important to be clear that noticing traits does not mean diagnosing. Officers should not label individuals or families unless the conversation is already moving in that direction. The purpose of this tool is to inform approach, reduce harm and improve safeguarding outcomes not to assign diagnoses.*

*Research consistently shows that minority children are less likely than white children to receive an ADHD diagnosis, while Black are more likely to be diagnosed with Conduct Disorder or Oppositional Defiant Disorder. This suggests that neurodevelopmental differences may be mislabelled as behavioural problems.*

*Since ADHD was first studied in the late 1700s, it has mainly focused on white, hyperactive, school-aged boys. Although research on girls and women is growing, the myth that ADHD is a condition of boyhood has limited diagnosis and support for generations particularly for Black girls and women who are more likely to mask.*

*This matters in missing cases because ADHD traits such as impulsivity, emotional dysregulation, and difficulty assessing risk can increase vulnerability while missing. When behaviour is interpreted as "bad" rather than neurodevelopmental, policing responses are more likely than safeguarding responses.*

*A simple but effective communication adjustment can be used at any stage of a missing case. Officers can ask calmly and directly:*

*"Is there anything that makes this harder for you right now? Noise? Lights? People?"*

► **MISSING PEOPLE**

is the only UK charity providing a lifeline to those affected by a disappearance or thinking of going missing. For support talk to us on 116 000.

<https://www.missingpeople.org.uk>

► **LISTEN UP**

is a national research and training organisation established to amplify the experiences of Black and racialised children in child protection research, policy and practice. Listen Up is the leading organisation increasing awareness about adultification bias and its implications for child protection.

<https://listenupresearch.org/>

**missing  
people**

Registered charity in England and Wales (1020419)  
and in Scotland (SC047419)

