

## Missing People's response to the College of Policing's consultation on the definition of 'missing'

### Introduction

1. The College of Policing is proposing a new definition of 'missing' following a consultation launched in 2015 on the draft Authorised Professional Practice on missing persons. The new definition has been established so that 'all reports of missing people sit within a continuum of risk from 'absent-no apparent risk', where some people may be classified as absent, through to high-risk cases that require immediate, intensive action.<sup>1</sup>
2. Missing People welcome the opportunity to respond to the consultation on the definition of 'missing.' We have a number of comments and concerns, which are outlined below.

### Our response

3. We think the proposal has some benefits. Firstly, the new approach includes confirmation that there will be review times set for all activities. However, we recommend that there is clarity about exact timescales for reviews to take place. We are pleased that the new definition of 'missing' means there is one system rather than two which will ensure it is easier for a missing person to be escalated within the risk assessment system and therefore receive an appropriate police response. Having one system will no doubt make it easier to ensure better data is kept about those people classified as 'absent.' Finally, we agree that other agencies and individuals have a role to play in safeguarding and that it's not just the police's responsibility.
4. We agree that it makes sense that the police should prioritise missing people at greatest risk however we would like to stress that the risk assessment should be robust to ensure people are correctly risk assessed and receive the appropriate police response.
5. We have some concerns about the new proposed definition of 'missing.' We do not agree with the use of the absent category as we disagree with the concept of no apparent risk. This is because we think that the staff member or Police Officer performing the risk assessment may not be aware of risks, rather than the person not being at risk. We feel that this new approach does not take into account the issues highlighted by a recent report by the HMIC on missing children.<sup>2</sup> The report shows that information on risk held by police was not always easily accessible to call handlers. Furthermore, risk assessments held by other agencies may not be available

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<sup>1</sup> College of Policing (2016) Authorised Professional Practice on missing persons – consultation on the definition of 'missing.'

<sup>2</sup> HMIC (2016) Missing children: who cares. The police response to missing and absent children.

to call handlers. In addition, there is a lack of safe and well checks and return home interviews for people classified as absent which means that information on risk is not updated or increased following a missing incident.

6. We are concerned that this consultation does not address the confusion surrounding the terms 'absent without authorisation' and 'absent'. Absent without authorisation is a term used by local authorities to describe 'a looked after child whose whereabouts is known but who is not at their placement or place they are expected to be and the carer has concerns or the incident has been notified to the local authority or the police'. As the APPG on Missing and Runaway Children and Adults' inquiry into safeguarding absent children highlighted there are challenges in how the 'absent' category interacts with the definition of 'unauthorised absence' applied in relation to children going missing from care.<sup>3</sup> We feel that those children who are classified as absent without authorisation require a different response to missing children where the concerns focus on their whereabouts and safety not being known. Furthermore, we agree with the recommendation made by the APPG on Missing and Runaway Children and Adults that the Department for Education should work jointly with NPCC and College of Policing to ensure that the 'absent without authorisation' and 'missing' categories are complementary.<sup>4</sup>
7. We would like to see an impact assessment of predicted costs of removing the absent category that includes safeguarding, social and economic impacts as well as similar impact assessment of maintaining the absent category.
8. We have some concerns about the example used on page 4 of the consultation document concerning the police response. Our definition of a missing person is that their whereabouts are unknown and they are at risk of harm. In the example provided we believe that if the child was thought to be at risk of harm then the police should become involved either as a missing person's case if their whereabouts are unknown, or if their whereabouts are known and they are at risk of harm then this may require the use of a section 47 investigation. We believe that there should be a police response when someone needs to be safeguarded because they are known or thought to be at risk whether or not their whereabouts are known.
9. We are concerned about the inclusion in the definition of missing of that they may be 'a threat to themselves or others' or that 'there are substantial grounds that the public is in danger.'<sup>7</sup> We would like to highlight our own approach, which differs to the proposed new definition, should someone be missing and also be wanted for a crime.

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<sup>3</sup> The All Party Parliamentary Group for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults (2016) Inquiry into the safeguarding of 'absent' children. 'It is good when someone cares.'

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

10. We believe that when a person is reported missing, who is also wanted for a crime, the police should assess whether their concern for the missing person's welfare outweighs their desire to apprehend the person and their risk to the public.
11. The charity Missing People only publicises appeals for missing people on the request of the police and only provides publicity for a missing person where the primary reason for looking for them is their welfare.
12. We think that the assessment of a missing and wanted individual's own vulnerability and their risk to the public is something that should be made on a case by case basis. It is not as clear-cut as saying all wanted people should or should not be appealed for as missing and the assessment made by police reflects this.

### **About Missing People**

13. Missing People is a UK charity which offers a lifeline to children and adults reported missing to the police and other agencies. We listen in confidence, and support missing people and their families to explore their options and, where possible, to reconnect. For those left behind we provide specialised support to ease the heartache and confusion, and help search for their missing loved ones. We provide our services through partnership working, including with the police and social services, as well as other charities and professionals, and also undertake research and policy work.
14. We provide a return home interview service for missing children in several local authorities, and on request for absent children too.

Please note we have recently updated our new position statement on absent and missing, which can be accessed here:

<http://www.missingpeople.org.uk/files/Policy%20briefings/absent%202016.pdf>

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