

# The absent category – safeguarding children and vulnerable adults?

## Introduction

In 2013, national police guidance<sup>1</sup> introduced a new category of an absent person, and revised their definition of a missing person. In this guidance:

An absent person is defined as a “*person not at a place where they are expected or required to be*” and perceived to be “*not at any apparent risk*”. When someone is categorised as absent, no police response is required except to monitor and review the situation.

A missing person is defined as: “*Anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established and where the circumstances are out of character or the context suggests the person may be subject of crime or at risk of harm to themselves or another.*” When someone is categorised as missing, the police will investigate their disappearance and try to find and safeguard them.

The new category of absent was introduced to bring in a “*more proportionate and risk-based response*”, because of concern that sending police officers out to follow up all reports regardless of the level of risk involved may not have been an efficient use of resources.<sup>2</sup>

Under the Children Act 1989, the police, working with as local authority children’s social care services and other agencies is responsible for making enquiries to safeguard and secure the welfare of any child within their area who is suffering (or is likely to suffer) significant harm.

## Missing People has significant concerns about whether the absent category effectively safeguards vulnerable children and adults.

We are concerned about the use of the term “not at any apparent risk” which is part of the definition of absent. As the evidence below shows, most children and adults who disappear are vulnerable before they go, and at higher risk of crime and exploitation when they are missing and hidden from help.

- The majority of children go missing because of abuse, neglect or conflict at home, and many also have serious mental health issues.<sup>3</sup> While missing, 1 in 6 children sleep rough or stay with someone they have just met, and 1 in 8 report being physically harmed. 70 percent of victims of sexual exploitation have also been reported missing.<sup>4</sup> 70% of children who we support through one of our return home interview services disclosed information related to risks they face – including being a victim of serious crimes.
- Up to 80 percent of missing adults have a mental health issue, and 1 in 20 adults goes missing with the intention of taking their own life. We know that 1 in 3 adults felt in danger while missing, and 3 in 10 slept rough.<sup>5</sup>

We therefore question whether anyone whose whereabouts and safety are unknown can be classified as “not at any apparent risk”, especially since someone is reporting them as missing because they are worried about them.

We are concerned that people are being classified as absent because the risks they face are not known by the police officer/s or staff conducting the risk assessment, rather than because they are not at risk. Sometimes, this may be because no professional knows about the risks a person faces. Sometimes this may be because other agencies have not shared information they hold about risks with the police. Sometimes, this may be because the person in the police making the risk assessment does not have full access to information held about risks by the police.<sup>6</sup>

We are concerned that opportunities to find out about the risks absent children and adults face are being missed. Most forces do not conduct a Safe and Well Check for a child or adult who has returned after an “absent” episode.<sup>7</sup> These checks are conducted after every missing episode and provide an opportunity for the police to check whether the person is safe and well, whether they need urgent support (e.g. medical attention) and whether their risk assessment should be reviewed. DfE Statutory Guidance mandates local authorities to provide return home interviews when a child returns from being missing, to find out from the child why they went missing, what happened while they were away, the risks they face, and what help they need to tackle these risks. These interviews are not mandatory for children who have been absent, or for adults who return from a missing or absent episode. As a result, very few children who have been absent, or adults who have been absent or missing receive a return home interview.

We are concerned about police forces’ different ways of using the absent category. For example, some forces rarely classify children missing from care as absent because they perceive them to be at risk whereas others only classify children missing from care as absent.<sup>8</sup> Deciding that one group of people (such as children missing from care) can be defined as absent whereas others cannot creates potential safeguarding risks. This approach could mean children in significant danger are defined as absent and receive no police response.

We are concerned about the lack of data available about absent children and adults. In the 2014/15 NCA Missing Persons Data Report<sup>9</sup>, several police forces using the absent category were unable to provide full data about absent children and adults. The recent HMIC report “Missing Children, Who Cares?” stated “*The current quality of, and access to, management information is limiting forces’ abilities fully to understand the scale of missing and absent children, the quality of service (and outcomes for children) and the demand being placed upon them.*” This lack of data could limit forces’ ability to assess the use and impact of the absent category on safeguarding children and adults, and how it compares to missing person data.

We are concerned that the category of absent has become conflated with the category of “*absent without authorisation*” 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. We think this group of children requires a different response to missing children where the concerns focus on their whereabouts and safety not being known.

## Abandoning the absent category

Jo Youle, CEO of Missing People: *“In all policy decisions there are often unintended consequences. The absent category has created a group of children who have gone missing and never received any response. We don’t know enough about these children and we are at risk of ignoring them whilst they cope with difficult problems and are vulnerable to harm. We could well be letting them down.”*

### **Missing People believes that the absent category should no longer be used.**

The concerns highlighted above mean that vulnerable children and adults are likely to be slipping through the net, and not being effectively safeguarded if they are classified as absent not missing. We therefore agree with the findings of the All Party parliamentary Group for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults Inquiry into safeguarding of absent children<sup>10</sup> that the absent category should be abandoned.

We believe a more effective definition of a missing person would be *“a person whose whereabouts are unknown, and who is at risk of harm”*.

We agree with the findings of the APPG Inquiry that the police should classify a missing adult or child as low, medium or high risk. We think the term *“not at any apparent risk”* should not be used for someone who is missing, if the above definition of a missing person is in place.

We think that risk assessments should be *“comprehensive”* whenever possible –based on all the information the police hold about the person, together with information held by other agencies and information provided by the person reporting the disappearance. Risk assessments should also be dynamic - regularly reviewed in light of new information and because the risks faced by a missing person can increase with the time they are missing.

We believe that every adult and child who returns from a missing episode should be offered a return home interview with an independent (non-statutory) professional as an opportunity to find out what risks they face and what help they need to reduce these risks to inform future risk assessments and prevent repeat missing incidents. A Social Return on Investment Analysis of RHI and follow up support services provided by Missing People and other charities found that for every £1 invested in these services, £5.27 of social value is returned through reducing the risks children face, providing police intelligence and improving safeguarding. This report, produced by Railway Children states that *“young people may see the police and social workers as figures of authority and be more willing to engage with someone independent.”*<sup>11</sup>

Finally, a separate category to missing person should be created where there is concern for the person’s welfare but their whereabouts are known or suspected. This category could include those who are currently defined as *“away from placement/ absent without authorisation”*. We agree with the APPG Inquiry into Safeguarding Absent Children recommendation that the Department for Education should work with the College of Policing and National Police Chiefs Council to update guidance to ensure the absent without authorisation and missing categories are clear and complementary, and to ensure there is clarity about the responsibilities of police, local authorities and other agencies for managing and responding to the risks of a person in this situation.

## References

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