



**“From what I’ve experienced, it will go bad every single time”**

**The scale and nature of harm experienced by missing children in the UK**

**missing  
people**

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

**A lifeline when someone disappears**

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### **About Missing People**

Missing People is the only charity in the UK which is dedicated to supporting those affected by missing. The charity provides specialist support to people who are at risk of going missing, those who are missing, and the families and friends left behind. For more information about the support services the charity provides, please visit our website: [www.missingpeople.org.uk](http://www.missingpeople.org.uk).

Understanding missing and the impact on those left behind enables Missing People and our partners to provide better services. Missing People's research team conducts research and evaluation projects on a range of topics. Recent reports can be found on our website: [www.missingpeople.org.uk/for-professionals/information-and-policy/information-and-research](http://www.missingpeople.org.uk/for-professionals/information-and-policy/information-and-research).

### **Project funding**

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# Contents page

Research aims	1
Key findings	2
Recommendations	6
Background	7
Research findings	10
Harm while missing	11
The scale of harm experienced by missing children	12
Why do children come to harm while missing?	13
Disclosures of harm	14
The nature of harm experienced by missing children	17
Risks being experienced by, or influencing, missing children	26
Conclusion	36
Appendix	37

# Research Aims

Around 575 children are reported missing in the UK each day. However, while several studies have explored why children go missing, there is limited understanding of children's experiences of harm while missing.

This research aims to:

1. Identify the risk factors being experienced by missing children
2. Identify the nature and scale of harm being experienced while they are missing

A mixed methods approach has been used in this research. This included:

- Conducting a literature review
- Analysing 558 Missing People helpline records
- Analysing 498 Return Home Interview records
- Analysing data collected from UK police forces and local authorities via Freedom of Information Request
- Conducting focus groups with 13 young people
- 31 professionals sharing their views via an online survey



# Key Findings

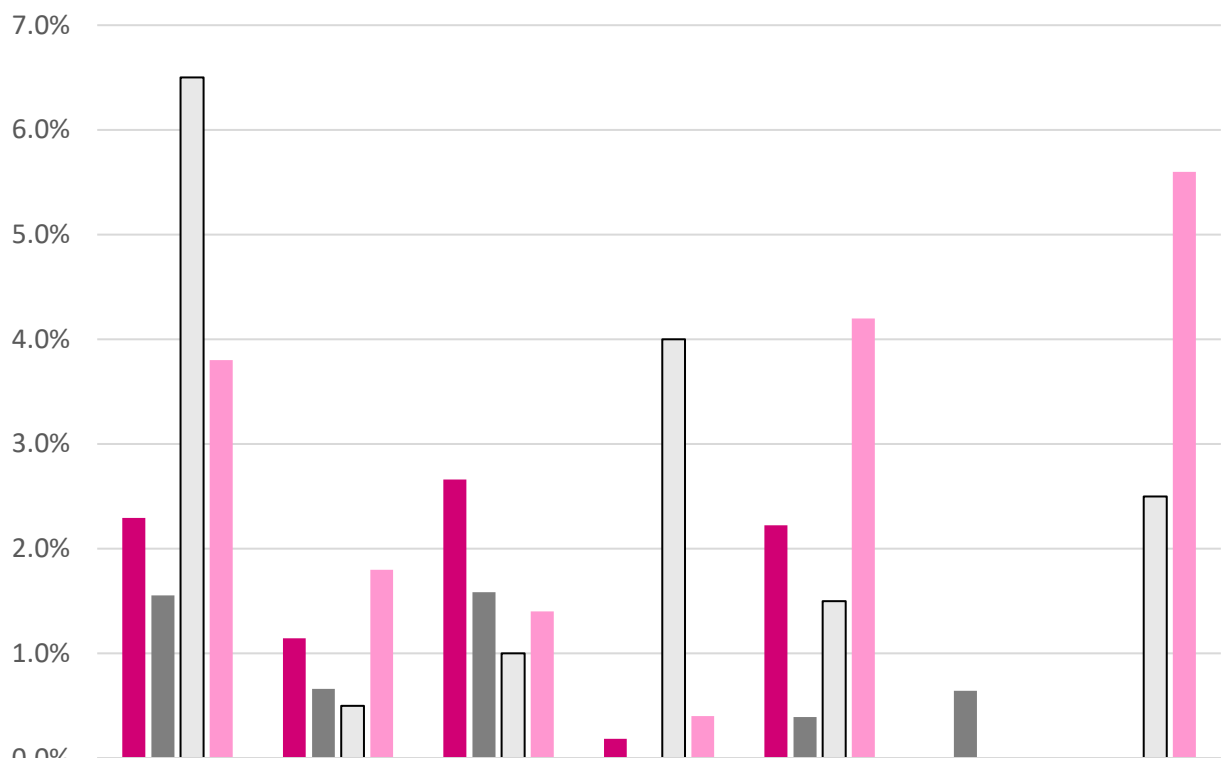
## Harm occurred in up to 1 in 7 missing child incidents

- Data shared via FOI requests from local authorities, using return home interview records, showed that **7%** of incidents had evidence of harm having occurred (1,723 of 25,803)
- Data shared via FOI requests from police forces, using missing incident records, showed that **7%** of incidents had evidence of harm having occurred (3,173 of 49,054)
- **15%** of contacts to Missing People’s helpline where the child was still missing or had returned from being missing had evidence of harm (30 of 199)
- **12%** of return home interviews conducted by Missing People contained evidence of harm (58 of 498)
- The variation in percentages suggests that children do not always disclose harm, particularly to police or social care
- These percentages put the rates of harm significantly higher than previous estimates, including those provided by the National Crime Agency using police data. This shows a need to be cautious of using police data when predicting harm or designing responses to missing incidents and support services



**There was evidence of various types of harm, although these varied by source. Physical harm was more consistently evidenced across all data sources.**

Evidence of harm in local authority data, police data, Missing People helpline records, and Missing People return home interview records

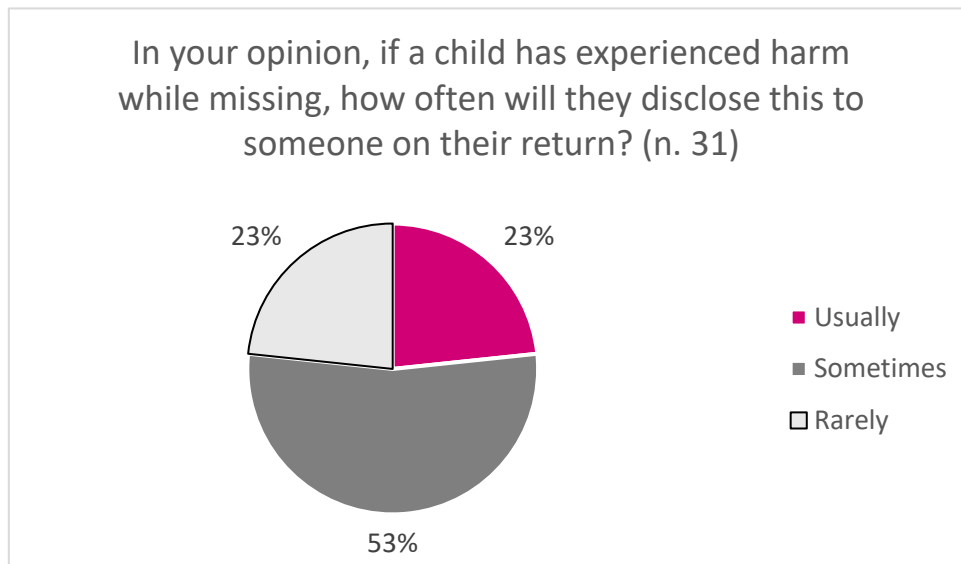


Local authority data	2.3%	1.1%	2.7%	0.2%	2.2%		
Police data	1.6%	0.7%	1.6%	0.0%	0.4%	0.6%	
Helpline records	6.5%	0.5%	1.0%	4.0%	1.5%		2.5%
RHI records	3.8%	1.8%	1.4%	0.4%	4.2%		5.6%

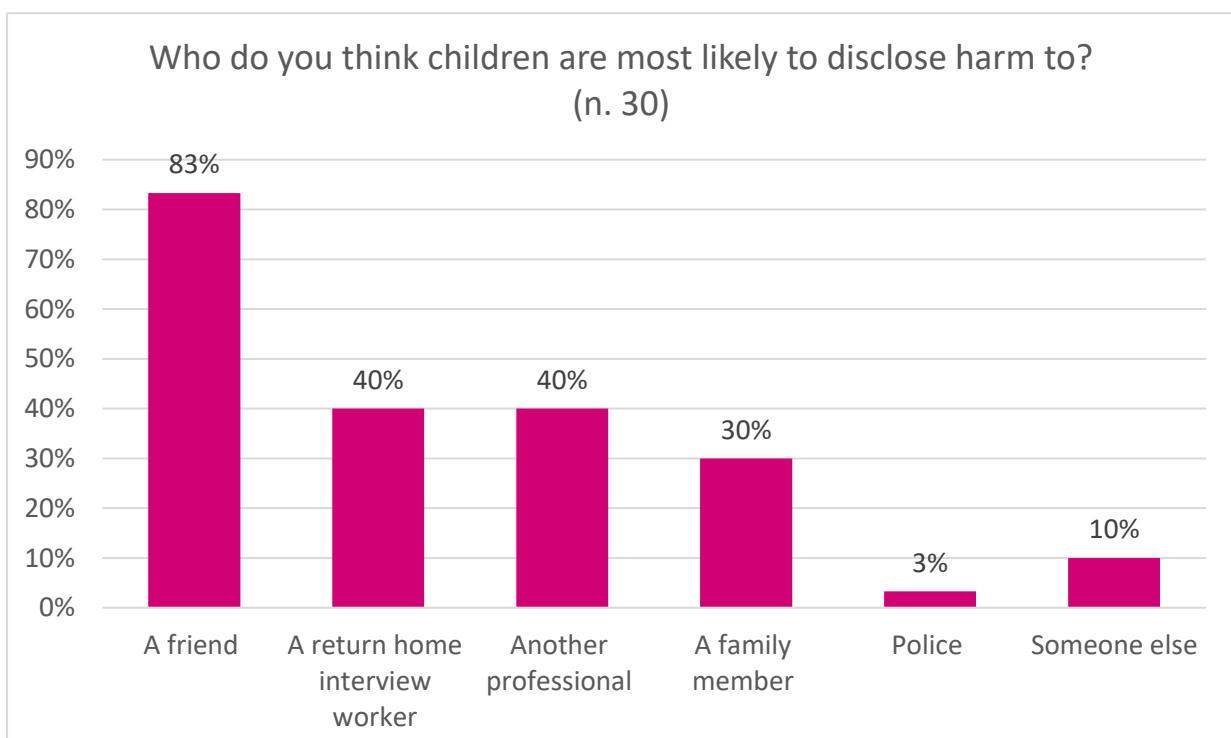
Local authority data    Police data    Helpline records    RHI records

## Only 1 in 4 professionals felt that children ‘usually’ disclose if they have experienced harm while missing

- The majority of professionals felt that children only sometimes or rarely disclose harm while missing. It is therefore likely that, while the rates of harm identified in this research are higher than previous data suggests, there is evidence to suggest that they remain a significant under-estimate of the true scale of harm experienced by missing children



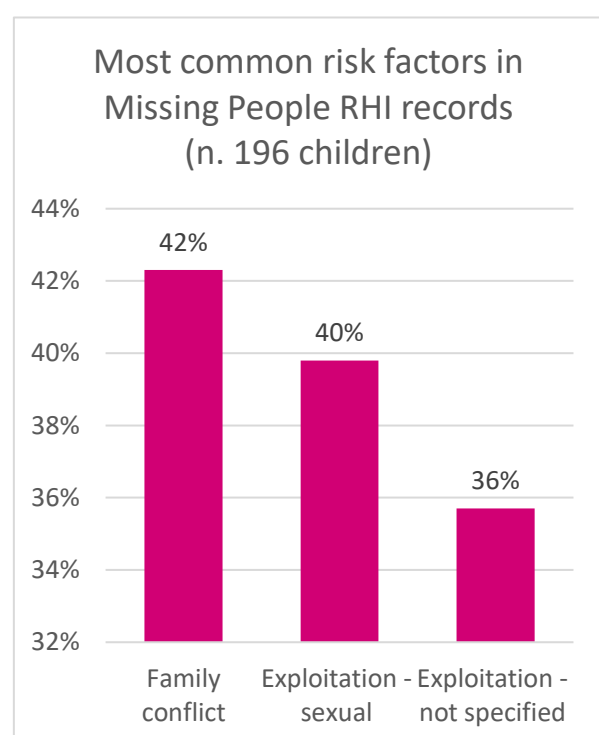
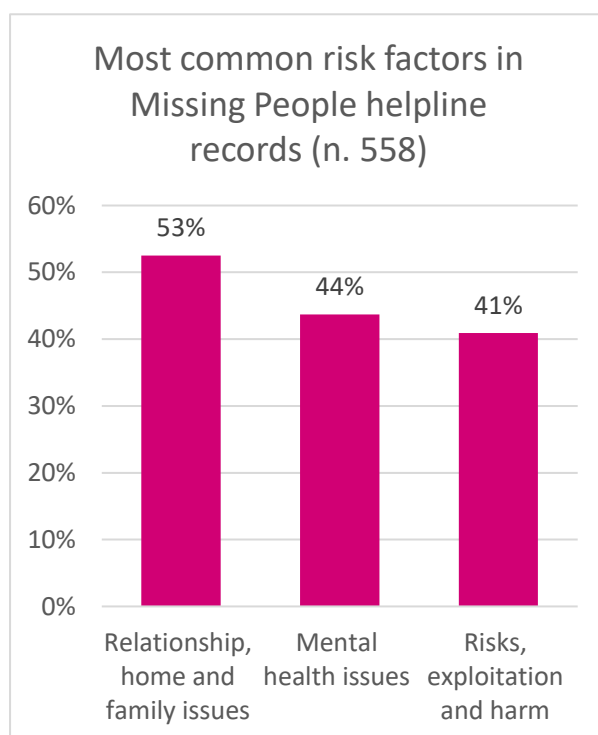
## Professionals thought children were most likely to disclose any harm that had occurred to a friend



## The most common risk factors for going missing identified in Missing People records were relationship, home and family issues; mental health issues; and risks linked to exploitation

These risk factors were evidenced in contacts from children to Missing People, either to the helpline or through return home interviews. They may have been factors directly influencing the child to go missing, or factors the child was otherwise experiencing that did not directly influence their missing episode. In some cases experiences of harm acted as a driver for children to go missing, for example linked to exploitation or other related harms.

- 53% (293 of 558) helpline records had evidence of relationship, home and family issues
- In return home interview records, 42% (83 of 196) children disclosed experiencing family conflict; 33% (65 of 196) were experiencing relationship breakdown or difficulties with their family or carer; 28% (55 of 196) were unhappy with their care arrangements
- Mental health was the second most commonly identified risk factor in contacts to Missing People’s helpline, with 44% (244 of 558) of contacts having some evidence of the child experiencing mental health issues or poor mental wellbeing
- In return home interview records, 40% (78 of 196) of children showed evidence of risks around sexual exploitation, and 35% (69 of 196) showed risks of criminal exploitation. 36% (70 of 196) showed risks of exploitation, but it was not clear whether this was sexual or criminal. Many of the young people were experiencing risks linked to multiple forms of exploitation. While missing in itself can be a warning sign of exploitation, the risks identified were those additional to missing, for example the child disclosing spending time with older people or being given money



# Recommendations

- Ofsted should conduct a focused review of the quality of Return Home Interviews. They are a key opportunity for children to disclose harm, but are being delivered inconsistently. Research suggests that there are barriers to disclosing risk and harm, so it is crucial that RHIs are being delivered in a manner that supports children to disclose harm if it has occurred. There is currently little benchmarking around quality and whether they are being delivered in a way that makes children feel safe to disclose harm.
- Local authorities should ensure that children are given a choice in who they speak to on their return, both in who delivers the RHI, but also in more informal opportunities for conversation about the missing episode, or through additional support services. This would increase the likelihood of children feeling safe to disclose harm, and acknowledges the fact that some children do not trust certain services, particularly the police and social care.
- The Department for Education should update their statutory guidance on missing children, with the update clearing setting out an expectation for this offer of choice in who children speak to on their return.
- Local safeguarding partnerships should commission specialist, intensive support services for children who are going missing repeatedly, ensuring child-centred, relationship-based support is available as evidence suggests that these factors can facilitate disclosures of harm, and result in more meaningful work to address that harm through tailored support.
- Police forces and local authorities should ensure that records are more actively updated when disclosures are made at a later point after the child's return from missing. This would help to evidence harm to build local and national understanding, but more importantly, would provide a fuller picture of the risks if a child goes missing again. Data quality is clearly poor, despite professionals knowing that the rates of harm are higher than reported, which risks leaving children unsupported.

# Background

Around 575 children are reported missing to the police every day in the UK.<sup>i</sup>

Going missing should be seen as a warning sign that something is not going right for that child. Previous research and national guidance have acknowledged that missing incidents should be recognised as a key indicator of risk, and are often a symptom or indicator of a problem that a child is experiencing.

Research has explored various risk factors related to missing children, leading to improved understanding of the factors that may influence a child to go missing.

Research has evidenced, in particular, links between missing and:

- Child criminal exploitation<sup>ii</sup>
- Child sexual exploitation<sup>iii</sup>
- Trafficking<sup>iv</sup>
- Unhappiness at home<sup>v</sup>

Official statistics and research also demonstrate that some populations of children are more likely to go missing, or are disproportionately represented in the population of missing children. This is particularly notable for children who are living in care,<sup>vi</sup> and Black children.<sup>vii</sup>

Much of the existing research focuses on vulnerability and risk. While this can suggest that the child is experiencing a harmful or potentially harmful situation, it does not necessarily speak to the harm while they are actually missing.

There are some limited police statistics around harm. The National Crime Agency most recently published statistics on the harm experienced by missing people in their 2022-23 report, reporting that only 1.9% of missing incidents related to children resulted in harm occurring.<sup>viii</sup> However, it is highly likely that these figures do not demonstrate the true extent of harm experienced by missing children. This is because:

- a) The missing statistics only include information actually shared by the returned missing child with the police, or harm that may be easily identified by the police on their return, for example obvious physical harm. There are barriers to disclosures of harm, particularly to the police
- b) Information may be stored elsewhere in police systems and not in missing records, for example in victim or crime reports
- c) The statistics are dependent on accurate recording and reporting in found reports

This has been acknowledged by the NCA: *“[it] is based on an officer’s interpretation, as well as being dependent on the accuracy with which the officer completes the report and how it is later transposed onto COMPACT. In addition, the report relies on disclosures by a missing person as to whether they came to any harm while missing.”*

This research therefore aims to:

1. Identify the risk factors experienced by missing children
2. Identify the nature and scale of harm experienced while they are missing

## Methodology

A mixed methods approach has been used in this research.

### Literature review

A literature review was conducted of relevant research in this area. This primarily covered research focused on:

- Missing children
- Harm, and how that relates to missing children
- Risk factors experienced by missing children, including exploitation, trafficking and mental health

### Missing People helpline records

Data was drawn from contacts from children under the age of 18 to Missing People’s helpline from July 2024 to May 2025. This resulted in 1,082 records being included for review. Only those records where there was enough information to analyse were included. This resulted in 558 records being included in the analysis.

Helpline records		
Stage of missing	Number of records	Percentage of records
Thinking about going missing	359	64.3%
Currently missing / away from home	165	30.6%
Returned from missing	34	5.1%

### Missing People return home interview records

Data was drawn from return home interviews delivered by Missing People in one local authority area in England. A random sample of 498 return home interview records were analysed. Due to repeat missing episodes, these return home interviews relate to 196 individual children.

### Freedom of information request

Freedom of Information requests were sent to all UK local authorities and police forces. The following data was requested, for the time period 1 January 2024 – 31 December 2024:

- The number of individual missing children in their area
- The number of missing incidents reported for children in their area
- How many of those missing incidents had a:
  - Sexual exploitation marker
  - Mental health marker
  - Criminal exploitation marker
  - Trafficking marker
- How many incidents had evidence of harm having occurred
- Of the incidents with evidence of harm, was the harm:
  - Physical
  - Sexual
  - Self-harm
  - Suicide
  - Emotional / psychological

Local authorities were also asked for data on the number of return home interviews completed.

### **Focus groups with young people**

Three focus groups were conducted with 13 young people. These young people were all aged under 18.

### **Professional survey**

31 professionals completed an online survey. This survey included questions of both a qualitative and quantitative nature.

### **Limitations**

The principal limitation to this research stems from the data used in the analysis. In order for risks, vulnerabilities and harms to have been captured and analysed in this research they must have been present in the records being analysed. This is dependent on the child disclosing this either to the Helpline or to the return home interview worker, or for the return home worker or police officer in a safe and well check to otherwise identify it. This limitation means that the absence of a risk, vulnerability or harm in the record does not necessarily mean that these have not been experienced.

Another limitation relates to the representativeness of the data. Missing People records will not necessarily be representative of all missing cases. In particular, the return home interview records analysed in this research relate to children who were referred into Missing People's specialist service and are likely to be experiencing a higher level of risk than the general population of missing children.

In terms of the data shared via FOI request, data was not received from all police forces and local authorities. For those who did respond, not all were able to share all data requested.

Due to the nature of this research, research was not conducted with children with lived experience of being missing about their direct experience of harm while missing. This was due to the sensitivities of asking children about their lived experiences of harm, and the risk of harm being caused by doing this. While voices of children are included through the focus groups, direct lived experience is not reflected in this research.

# Research Findings

A typology of harm was developed for this research, drawing both on previous research considering harm experienced while missing, and on Missing People's knowledge and expertise on the issue:

<b>Type of harm</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Death by suicide	Where the person has died by suicide while missing
Suicide related	An attempt to die by suicide, or stated intention to die by suicide
Self-harm	Where the missing person has hurt themselves physically, including inflicting cuts or other physical harm
Physical harm	Where the person suffered physical harm, including injuries, assault, or accident resulting in physical injuries
Emotional or psychological harm	Where the person has experienced fear, threats or intimidation
Sexual harm	Where the person has experienced sexual violence, abuse, or any unwanted behaviour of a sexual nature
Harm linked to exploitation	Where the person has experienced any type of harm linked to an exploitative situation, including child sexual exploitation or child criminal exploitation

## Harm while missing

A small number of research studies have explored the harm experienced by missing children.

Research using nearly 100,000 missing person records from one police force found that 1.7% of those under 18 came to harm while missing.<sup>ix</sup>

Research exploring the risks and harms experienced by repeat missing children, analysing police data and local authority data related to 285 repeat missing children, found that the most common harms reported by repeat missing children included physical violence, criminal exploitation, sexual violence and sexual exploitation.<sup>x</sup> This research also found that police data significantly underestimated the level of risk experienced by repeat missing children.

Research considering the circumstances surrounding seriously harmed missing children in England, found that being repeatedly missing, exploitation, school exclusion, multiple types of harm, and multiple vulnerabilities were mentioned in most of the 39 child safeguarding practice reviews reviewed for that research.<sup>xi</sup>

Additionally, research published in 2012 found that around one in nine young people said that they had been hurt or harmed while away from home.<sup>xii</sup>

However, there remains limited research about the nature and scale of harm experienced by missing children, with much of the existing research focused on police data which is known to likely underestimate the true scale of the issue.

## The scale of harm experienced by missing children

*“But from what I've experienced, it just, it will go bad every single time.” – young person*

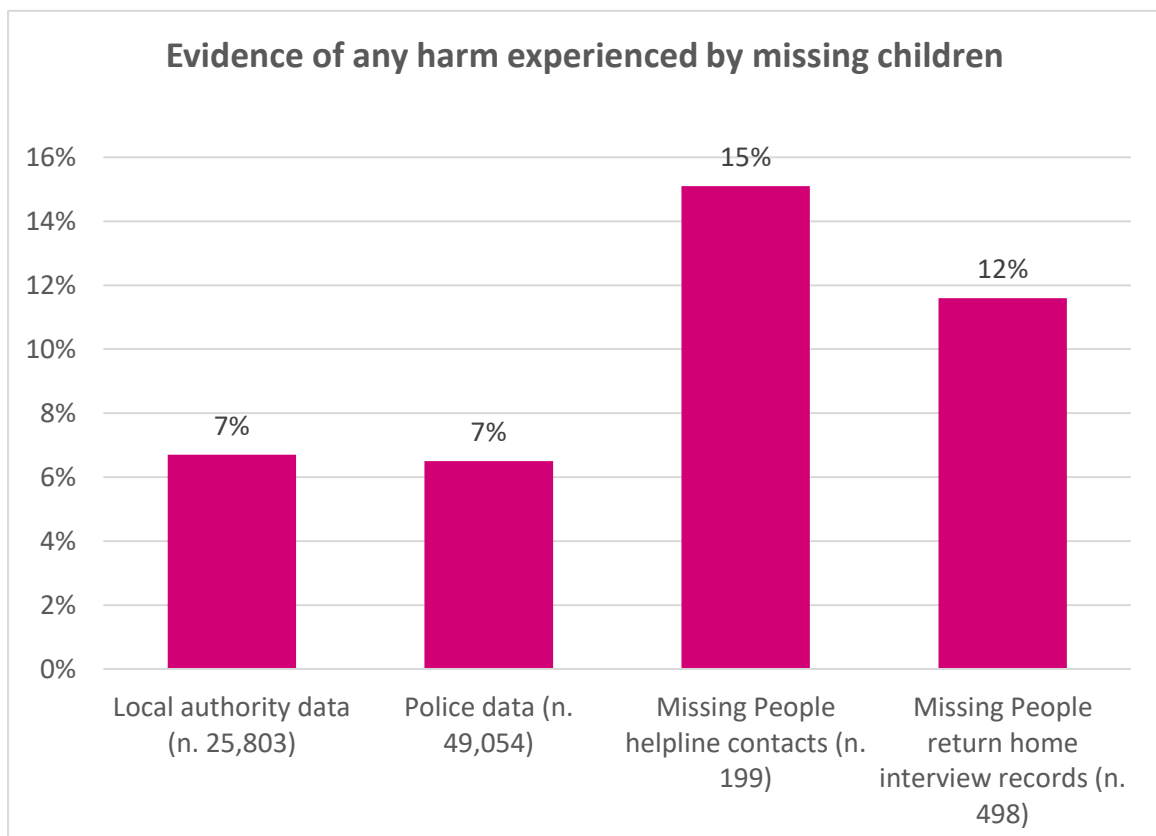
For this research, a range of data sources were used to try to better understand the nature of harm that occurs when a child is missing. As may be expected, there was significant variation depending on the data being considered.

As shown in the chart below, in terms of the number of incidents in which there was evidence of *any* harm:

- Data shared via FOI requests from local authorities, using return home interview records, showed that **7%** of incidents had evidence of harm having occurred
- Data shared via FOI requests from police forces, using missing incident records, showed that **7%** of incidents had evidence of harm having occurred

- **15%** of contacts to Missing People’s helpline where the child was still missing or had returned from being missing had evidence of harm
- **12%** of return home interviews conducted by Missing People contained evidence of harm

While there is variation between those data sources, overall this data suggests that the levels of harm experienced by missing children are higher than that contained in official police and local authority data, with 1 in 7 children contacting Missing People’s helpline disclosing experiences of at least one type of harm.



## Why do children come to harm while missing?

Professionals were asked what the main contributing factors to a child experiencing harm while missing were. Young people also shared what they would be worried about if their friend was to go missing. They referenced:

- The inherent risk of being missing while a child, including being unable to stay safe

*“The existing vulnerability of being a child” – professional*

*“Lack of protective factors, vulnerability to harm” – professional*  
*“Vulnerabilities of no money, transport, phone data / connectivity” – professional*

*“Not having a safe space to sleep or spend substantial time in, so they have to go to multiple places and will sometimes sleep rough” – professional*

*“No safe space to sleep” – professional*

*“Not having anywhere like safe to go like a lot of young people like like me personally, I would run away but not know like where I'm running to and like just be outside like the whole night and it will be like cold and all of that.” – young person*

- Risks linked to exploitation and grooming

*“CCE, CSE and online exploitation” – professional*

*“Other people – especially people met online” – professional*

*“The potential exposure to abusive / exploitative adults is far greater when away from known safe / protective spaces” – professional*

*“[any] prior experience of trafficking greatly increases the risk of them going missing again and of experiencing harm while missing” – professional*

- The use of substances, including drugs and alcohol, while missing

*“Substance misuse” – professional*

*“Children who are seeking alcohol and drugs from others with no method of payment” – professional*

*“The use of substances during a missing episode” – professional*

The complexity of factors was highlighted by some professionals:

*“Duration of episodes as access to support is diminished over time, impacts of online peer pressure, little education about online safety, poor or dysfunctional parental guidance, emotion regulation, misunderstanding of own basic needs, the volume of reporting blinding everyone from making an effective judgement on the seriousness of the situation in a timely manner.”- professional*

*“Lack of protective factors, vulnerability to harm, no immediate responses available for any crisis situations and ongoing issues even when returned home or to a place of safety in relation to what they experienced while missing” – professional*

## Disclosure of harm

*“Disclosures of harm often take weeks, months or even years before they disclose. Shame, fear, guilt can all be barriers, plus risk of repercussions on them if the perpetrators are found” – professional*

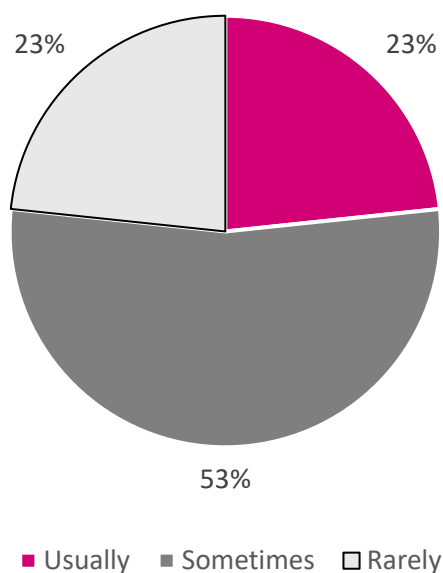
Professionals were asked how often they think that children will disclose harm on their return if they did in fact experience harm while missing. There were competing views about how often this happened, with only 1 in 4 feeling that children ‘usually’ disclose if they have experienced harm while missing, as is shown on the chart to the right.

Professionals were also asked who they think children are most likely to disclose harm to. The most common answer by some margin was ‘a friend’ (25 of 30). Less than half thought that the child would disclose to a return home interview worker (12 of 30), another professional (12 of 30), or a family member (9 of 30), and only one person thought children would disclose to the police.

This suggests that the findings in this research linked to the prevalence of harm will be an under-representation of the true scale of harm experienced. Significant and complex barriers exist to children disclosing harm, particularly to professionals such as police and social care. While not explored in this research, previous research has demonstrated that these barriers may be particularly acute for marginalised communities, or where individuals have had negative experiences with professionals in the past.

Professionals and young people identified various barriers that exist which may prevent children from telling professionals that they have suffered harm while missing.

In your opinion, if a child has experienced harm while missing, how often will they disclose this to someone on their return?



## Fear

Many professionals referenced the child potentially feeling fearful about disclosing harm. This may be fear linked to repercussions if the perpetrator of the harm finds out that they have disclosed it, or fear that telling someone may put them at additional risk. This was particularly the case if the young person is being groomed or exploited.

*“Worried about retribution to themselves and their family. This is mainly the case if a young person is being exploited and is harmed by an exploiter whilst missing” – professional*

*“Children may have been involved in criminality and are worried about getting into trouble” - professional*

*“Fear and reprisals” - professional*

*“Fear of telling someone which may put them at further harm” – professional*

*“They may also feel more vulnerable sharing information because will they / their community / their loved ones then be guaranteed protection which is sufficient?” – professional*

They may also worry that disclosing things will make their situation worse.

*“Yeah, I was going to say something similar actually that my first thought was actually similar in the sense that the mum has phoned the police or reported it, but obviously they've told you they're having struggles at home. Whether that be their parents or not, and if it is, could that make it worse? Because if you're trying to get away from a poor environment and then they try and come and find you, you'd be like trying to keep running off. It might make things worse.” – young person*

### **Feelings of shame**

Some professionals felt that children may feel shame or embarrassment about the missing incident or the harm they may have experienced.

*“Children may feel shame about an incident or feel they are to blame” – professional*

*“Not being believed, [feeling] that it is their fault” - professional*

*“Shame” - professional*

*“I also think there is shame etc and a lot of other complicated feelings around it and so they feel embarrassed too” – professional*

*“Shame, guilt, fear of repercussion to themselves or others” - professional*

### **Lack of trust with professionals**

Professionals were clear that there is a need to build up trust with children before they will feel confident to share any harm or risk.

*“Not trusting the professionals and not feeling that any support can help that harm they are experiencing” – professional*

*“A reluctance to speak with Police is the main one, other agencies such as social care, placement staff or family tend to gain more information, this maybe due to a child feeling they can trust these people as they know them” – professional*

*“Trust in police / authority” – professional*

*“Not believing services can help. Sometimes believing services might cause more harm. Distrust in professionals” – professional*

Young people agreed with this, sharing that they would not be comfortable talking to professionals, particularly the police. This was in the context of young people being asked if they would tell the police if their friend was missing and potentially at risk.

*“I'd say I'd say 85% out of 100% [come to harm while away]. But I disagree with any police database just for the sore fact that there'll be a lot of things that the police do know about and a lot of things that the police don't know about.” – young person*

*“I know that he's went missing. I've spoken to him. I know where he is, but he's went missing. And police have come to me asking*

*about where, what, when, and where. I'm not telling nothing. It's so real. I'm not telling him, it's nothing.”*  
– young person

*“I know, for instance, if I used my friend from earlier, if I was to tell her, oh, by the way, there's police looking for you as well. She's going about 100 miles further.”* – young person

Previous research has suggested that this will be enhanced for people from minoritised communities, who have poorer trust in services and may have a history of being under-protected by services like the police and social care.<sup>xiii</sup>

### **Poor quality interventions**

There were also reflections about the impact of poor quality interventions, including of statutory offers such as return home interviews.

*“Poor return home interviews, interviews offered by social care rarely completed and if so lack of detail and timeliness of the actual interview. Interviews not held in location or time agreed with the child themselves.”* – professional

*“We have had police return home interviews that have been rubbish. Barely asked enough questions, not really getting into the nitty gritty of it.”*  
– professional

*“Non-consistent care staff members”* – professional

*“Professionals not given the training tools they need to strike up rapport and try and connect”* – professional

This research suggests that the prevalence of harm experienced by missing children is

higher than the official data suggests, with Missing People helpline contacts showing that as many as 1 in 7 missing children experience some form of harm while missing, compared to less than 2% in National Crime Agency statistics.

However, views from professionals and young people also suggest that children will not always disclose the harm that they have experienced to professionals on their return due to significant and varied barriers, so 1 in 7 is likely to remain an underestimate of the true scale of harm. The barriers detailed above help to explain why children are less likely to disclose harm to some professionals, and less likely to disclose specific types of harm, in particular those linked to sexual harm and exploitation. These barriers, while likely to affect all children in some form, will affect some communities more than others, with intersectionality further impacting a sense of safety in making disclosures.

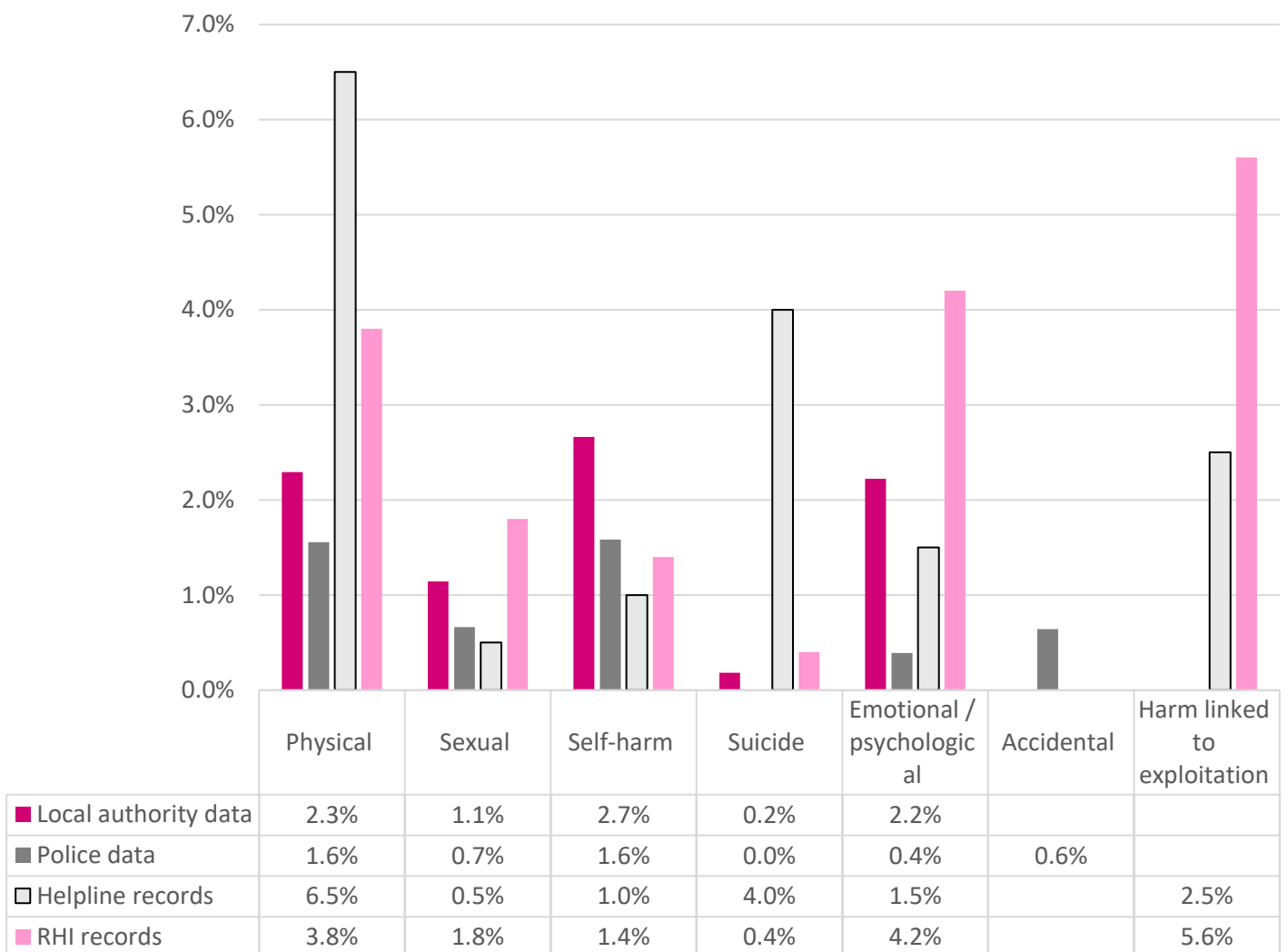
## The nature of the harm experienced by missing children

In terms of the specific type of harm experienced by missing children, the chart below shows the data broken down by the different data sources. It should be noted that the specific harms will not necessarily equate to the total harm: this is because there was evidence of multiple types of harm in some cases.

The below chart includes accidental harm and harm linked to exploitation: this data was not requested as a matter of course from police forces or local authorities in the FOI request, however some police forces shared data on accidental harm.

Missing People records were able to be coded where there was evidence of exploitation related harm.

Evidence of harm in local authority data, police data, Missing People helpline records, and Missing People return home interview records



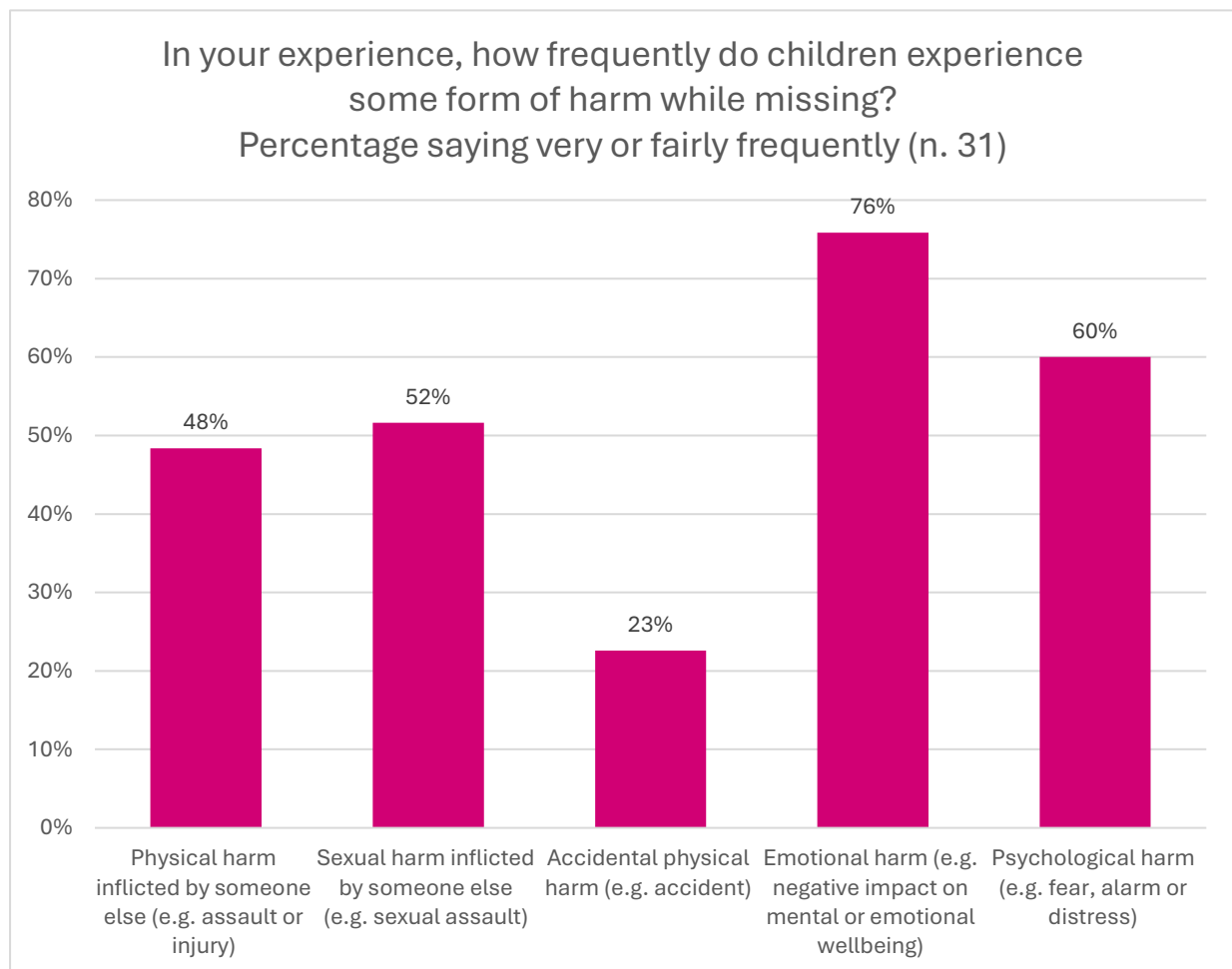
Local authority data Police data Helpline records RHI records

Professionals taking part in this research were asked how frequently, in their experience, do children experience some form of harm while missing.

As can be seen in the chart below, professionals often felt that missing children very or fairly frequently experienced some kind of harm while missing.

When considering specific types of harm, 3 in 4 thought that children very or fairly frequently experience emotional harm, and 3 in 5 thought that they very or fairly often experienced psychological harm.

Around half thought they very or fairly frequently experienced sexual harm inflicted by someone else, or physical harm inflicted by someone else. When considering accidental physical harm, only 1 in 5 thought that this happened very or fairly frequently. These views further highlight the under-reporting of harm and under-recording of harm by professionals, given that the official statistics on harm suffered are much lower.

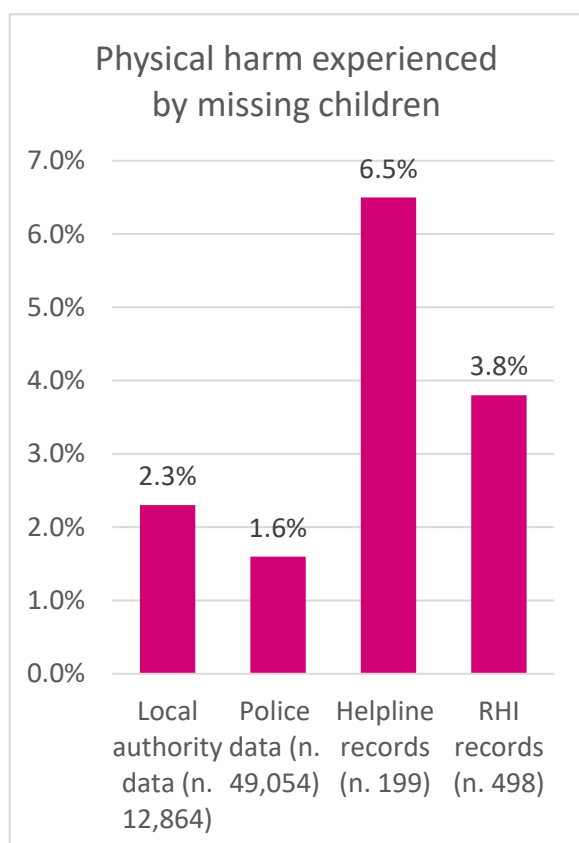


## Physical harm

*“Like I just want to elaborate, like for me, like I think [I’d be worried about] being threatened by somebody. I’d also be concerned about physical harm and that” – young person*

In terms of physical harm, there was evidence of this in:

- 2.3% of local authority records (295 of 12,864)
- 1.6% of police records (763 of 49,054)
- 6.5% of contacts to Missing People’s helpline (13 of 199)
- 3.8% of RHI records (19 of 498)



The local authority and police data used for this research does not enable further exploration of the types of physical harm experienced by missing children, however in Missing People’s helpline and RHI records, there was evidence of a variation of physical

harms. Some of these appeared to be accidental, while others seemed to have been inflicted by someone else.

*“But when I hear from you guys, I think that’s the reality of life. In this day and age right now, a friend could be dead.” – young person*

Examples include a girl falling over after a man had attempted to ‘grab’ her, and breaking her ankle in the course of the fall. There were examples of children having been missing overnight and unable to find anywhere safe or secure to sleep, so walking around and getting very cold and starting to feel unwell linked to the weather.

Some children had returned home with cuts and bruises. Sometimes this was self-inflicted, for example one child spoke of punching a wall and then hurting his hand and requiring hospital treatment.

But sometimes the circumstances suggested that the harm was caused by someone else, and there were examples of young people having been assaulted while missing.

There were a number of references to drinking alcohol to excess or taking drugs, with some children disclosing being sick or in unsafe situations as a result of that. In a small number of cases the child had required hospitalisation on their return.

## Sexual harm

In terms of sexual harm, there was evidence of this in:

- 1.1% of local authority records (140 of 12,246)
- 0.7% of police records (325 of 49,054)
- 0.5% of contacts to Missing People’s helpline (1 of 199)
- 1.8% of RHI records (9 of 498)

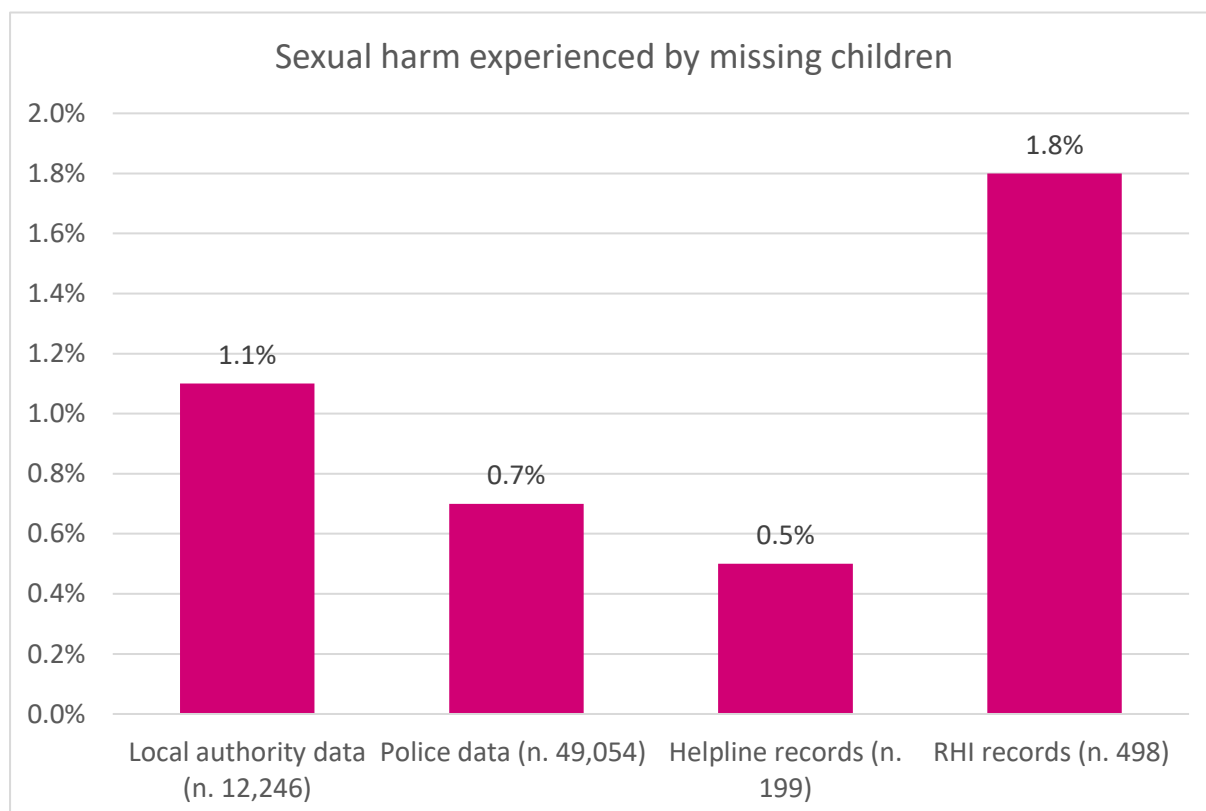
A relatively small proportion of incidents had evidence of sexual harm having occurred while the child was missing. Only one helpline record had evidence of this, and 9 return home interview records.

The children who did experience sexual harm while missing were all female. In some cases the child was sexually assaulted by someone who was not known to them, but in others the child did know who the person was.

The sexual harm ranged from harassment to serious sexual assault.

Sexual harm was recorded when there was evidence of a particular incident, or incidents, having occurred while the child was missing. While there are clear links, this can be differentiated from harm linked to sexual exploitation which involves exploitation of vulnerability in exchange for something of value.

While more broadly barriers exist for children in disclosing harm, this is particularly the case for sexual harm and abuse. These can result in a child not feeling safe or able to disclose sexual harm for many years, if at all.<sup>xiv</sup> It is therefore very likely that the prevalence of sexual harm identified in this research is an under-representation of the true scale of that harm.



## Self-harm and suicide

*“Yeah, like some. Some people run away and they may. They may be someone who's less mentally stable and they could have, like, a mental health episode. You want to call it that. Why they've run away and possibly commit further harm to themselves. There's a, you know, self-harm, suicide.” – Young person*

Self-harm and suicide are discussed together in this report because they stem from the same underlying root of emotional distress and can be critical indicators for immediate support. Similar factors are associated with self-harm and suicide, and self-harm can be an indicator for future suicide risk.<sup>xv</sup>

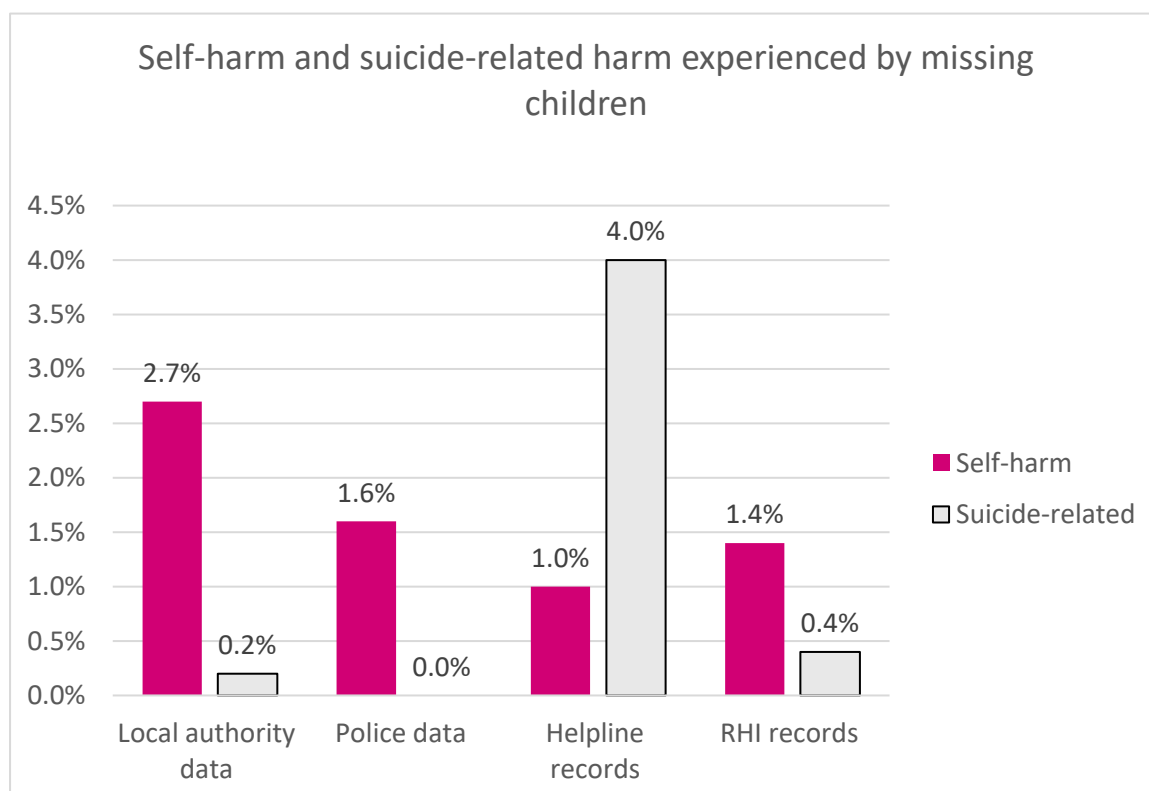
48 children died while missing in 2023-24, a small but significant proportion of the total number of people dying while missing.<sup>xvi</sup> While no statistics exist to show whether any of these deaths were due to suicide, given the strong links that we know exist between missing and suicide, we can assume that a

proportion of these deaths was due to suicide. Previous research has found the the most common cause of death for missing adults was suicide, accounting for 81% of fatalities where unknown case of death was excluded.<sup>xvii</sup> Research considering Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews has identified suicide as a cause of death for missing children.

In the data shared for this research, there was evidence of suicide-related harm in:

- 0.2% of local authority records (16 of 8,714)
- 0% of police records (0 of 26,768)
- 4% of Missing People helpline records (8 of 199)
- 0.4% of return home interview records (2 of 498)

Suicide-related harm includes experiencing feelings of suicide; attempts to take their life; or dying by suicide. It may be that the helpline data is higher than other sources due to the fact that the helpline is a confidential, non-judgemental service.



Previous research has shown that those going missing while suicidal may not reach out or disclose to professionals such as the police due to things like being fearful of the actions that will be taken as a result.<sup>xviii</sup>

And there was evidence of self-harm in:

- 2.7% of local authority records (232 of 8,714)
- 1.6% of police records (777 of 49,054)
- 1% of Missing People helpline records (2 of 199)
- 1.4% of return home interview records (7 of 498)

Risks around suicide and self-harm were clear in the survey responses and in the review of Missing People's records.

2 in 5 professionals thought that children deliberately harm themselves, but not with the intention of taking their own life, or experience suicidal thoughts or feelings 'often,' or 'sometimes,' and 1 in 5 thought that they 'often' or 'sometimes' make an attempt to take their own life.

Given that professionals reported that feelings of suicide or suicide related harm are risks fairly frequently faced by missing children, this again suggests that this harm is being under reported and recorded across all services.

This suggests that even where professionals suspect that there is risk, it is not showing up in records or statistics. It may be that it is not disclosed to professionals at all.



## Emotional / psychological harm

*"I'd probably say feeling scared, feeling unsafe" – young person*

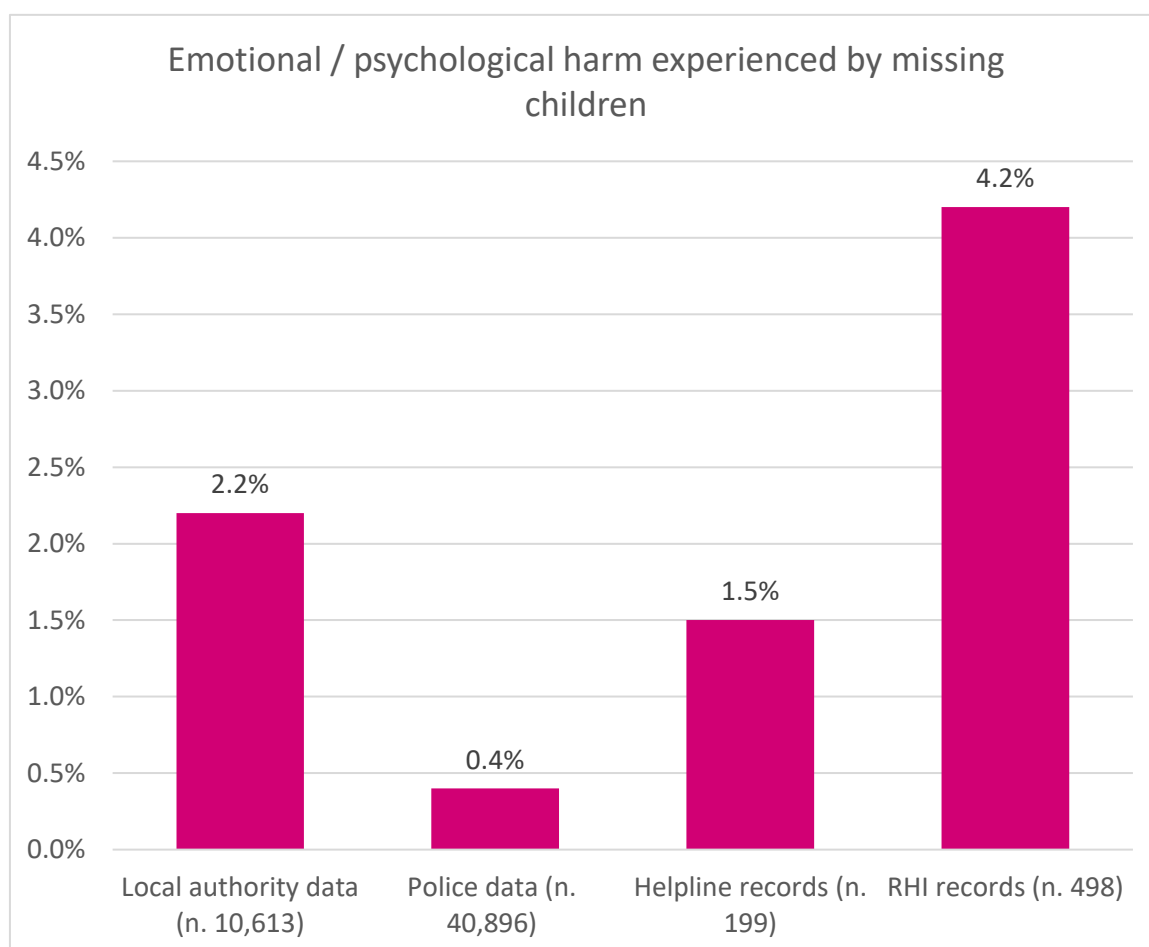
In the data shared for this research, there was evidence of emotional or psychological harm in:

- 2.2% of local authority records (236 of 10,613)
- 0.4% of police records (160 of 40,896)
- 1.5% of Missing People helpline records (3 of 199)
- 4.2% of return home interview records (21 of 498)

Where there was evidence of emotional or psychological harm this was often linked to the child being very upset, scared or distressed when they returned from being missing.

In cases where further detail about the emotional / psychological harm suffered was provided, this included feeling fear after being approached by strangers while missing; experiencing significant distress after consuming excessive amounts of alcohol, in addition to the physical harm experienced; experiencing harassment; and feeling unsafe linked to going missing while being exploited.

A small number of young people were also affected by something that happened to someone else while they were missing: examples included a child witnessing their friend self-harming, and another child witnessing their friend expressing suicidal thoughts and being taken by ambulance to hospital.



## Safety while missing

Professionals were asked how safe or unsafe they feel that children typically are while they are missing.

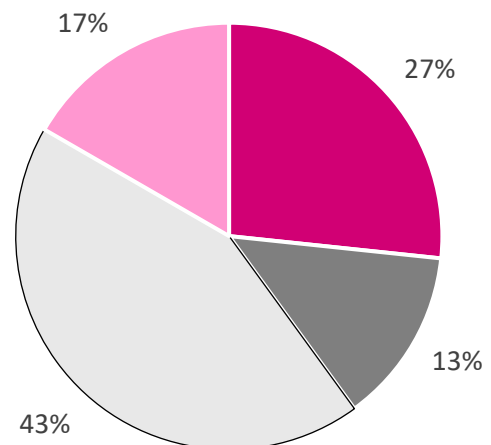
The majority felt that they are typically fairly or very unsafe, as can be seen in the chart to the right.

Young people commented on children not being able to stay safe and well while missing.

*“You know, when we talk about harm, though, as well, and I know maybe when I know the word harm, I probably think about like physical harm or something like that, but actually, when you really think about harm, like not eating properly, like when you're going missing, you're actually eating. What are you actually doing? have you got access to like that kind of stuff, all of that is kind of harm as well because you're not being cared for properly.” – young person*

*“Not having anywhere like safe to go like a lot of young people like like me personally, I would run away but not know like where I'm running to and like just be outside like the whole night and it will be like cold and all of that.” – young person*

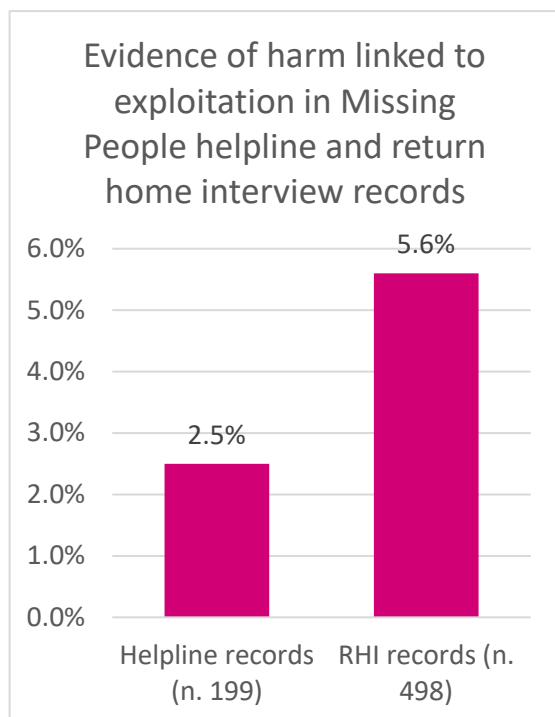
How safe or unsafe do you feel that children typically are when they are missing (n. 31)?



- Normally fairly safe
- Normally neither safe nor unsafe
- Normally fairly unsafe
- Normally very unsafe

## Harm linked to exploitation

Local authorities and police forces were not asked for data on harm linked to exploitation. However, it was possible to review Missing People helpline and RHI records for evidence of harm linked to exploitation. Some of these harms will also have been captured in other categories of harm, including physical, sexual and emotional or psychological harm.



There were examples of children who were harmed while in exploitative situations, for example while in accommodation with adults they did not know, or after having been given drugs or alcohol. This included serious sexual assault and physical harm.

Some of the young people who took part in this research spoke of the harm that missing children might experience if they go missing and are being exploited. They spoke in particular of situations where a child is in a trap house. They referred to the very real risks of physical and sexual harm, particularly when the missing person is a girl.

*“There’s more things girls have to worry about, especially if you’re selling drugs, you’re not selling weed,*

*you’re selling, you’re selling to crackheads, yeah, anything can happen. Like anything that happened to a guy can happen to a girl, and probably worse” – young person*

*“Will violence happen, will young people come to harm? Most likely yeah.” – young person*

*“I think there’s there’s been a time where she’s been missing for probably up to a week and in that time she got taken advantage of by older men and as well drugs, things like that” – young person*

But they also spoke of the wider harms or risks that young people may be exposed to while in exploitative situations: things like not having access to food, and certainly not healthy food; being unable to keep yourself clean, and potentially pick up infections from being in really unclean environments; and being exposed to things like used needles.

*“There’s no such thing as a shower [...] you’re ragging it out [...] the food you’re eating is unhealthy, you’re getting fast food [...] that’s all greasy, you’ll get acid reflux every morning when you wake up” – young person*

*“I’ve had crackheads pull up your needles and that, talking about ‘if you don’t free it up, I’m going to push the heroin in your system’ and that” – young person*

The range of risk and harm that young people identified suggests that those supporting children on return from being missing need to actively explore a wide range of factors and what that might mean for the child. It suggests a focus on things like safety planning, recognising that young people may find themselves in situations where it is difficult to stay safe, clean and healthy.

# Risks being experienced by, or influencing, missing children

Previous research has demonstrated the links between missing and various risk factors, including exploitation, mental ill-health and unhappiness at home. These factors may have influenced children to go missing in the first place, may increase their vulnerability or risk of harm while missing, and may be relevant in the support they need on return.

These risks may be things that can give an indication that the child may be experiencing or at risk of experiencing harm, even when this has not been disclosed. For example, a

child may present with various risk factors that are known to be associated with things like exploitation, and professionals should actively consider this in their engagement with missing children.

As part of this research Missing People helpline and return home interview records were reviewed for evidence of a range of different risk factors. Helpline records include contacts from children who were thinking about running away, currently missing, or who had returned from being missing

Most common risk factors identified in Missing People records			
Helpline (n. 588)	% of contacts	RHI (n. 196)	% of children
Relationship, home and family issues	53%	All exploitation	63%
Mental health issues	44%	Family conflict	42%
Risks, exploitation and harm	41%	Exploitation – sexual	40%
Suicide	23%	Exploitation – not specified	36%
Missing history	15%	Exploitation – criminal	35%
Self-harm	9%	Relationship breakdown / difficulties – family / carer	33%
Harmful behaviour	3%	Previous criminal activity	30%
Autism	2%	Unhappy with care arrangements	28%

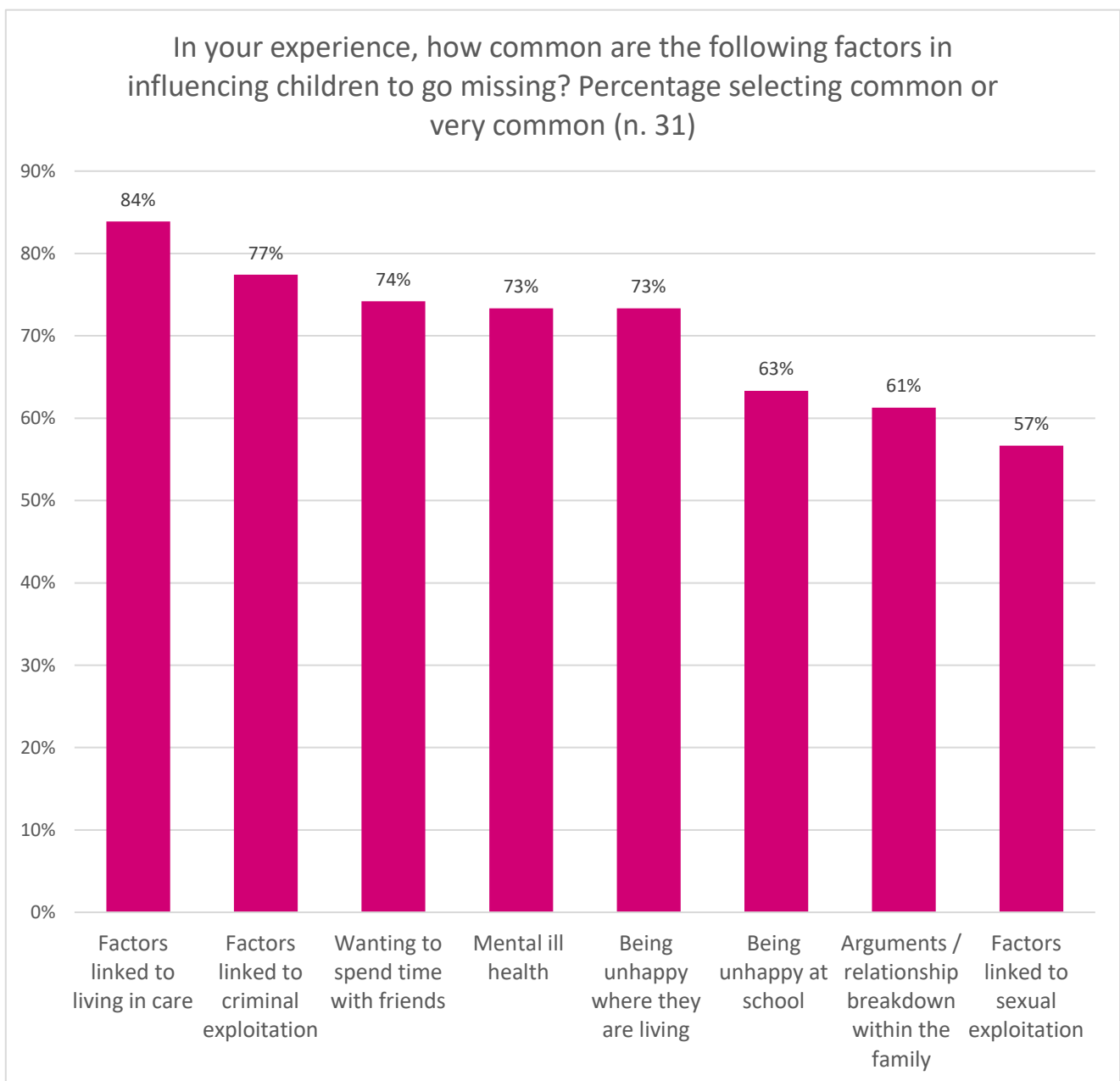
While there is some variation in the risk factors evident from those contacting Missing People’s helpline and those completing return home interviews, there are some commonalities. Namely family conflict, being unhappy at home or in care, and exploitation risks. Factors like family conflict and being unhappy at home will not necessarily mean a child is exposed to risk or that they are experiencing harm, even if they have been

factors in influencing the child to go missing. But they can be indicators of harms and factors that can have a negative impact on the wellbeing of the child. In some cases family conflict or being unhappy in care may be linked to things like abuse; or they may result in the child being so unhappy that they look for community elsewhere, potentially leading them into dangerous or exploitative situations.

Professionals were also asked how common a range of factors are in influencing children to go missing.

Similarly to those identified in Missing People records, a significant proportion of professionals thought that factors linked to living in care and being unhappy where they were living could act as influences in the child going missing, as well as factors linked to exploitation.

Mental health was identified as a factor in both Missing People helpline records and from professionals taking part in the survey, as was suicide and self-harm. Some of these will be explored in greater depth below.



## Relationships, home, family issues and factors linked to living in care

Issues at home and being unhappy where they are living are well recognised as being push factors influencing children to go missing.<sup>xix</sup>

This was evident in the records reviewed for this research:

- 53% (293 of 558) helpline records had evidence of relationship, home and family issues
- In return home interview records, 42% (83 of 196) children disclosed experiencing family conflict; 33% (65 of 196) were experiencing relationship breakdown or difficulties with their family or carer; 28% (55 of 196) were unhappy with their care arrangements
- For professionals completing the survey, 84% (26 of 31) thought factors linked to living in care were common or very common factors in influencing children to go missing; 73% (23 of 31) thought the same about where the young person was living; and 61% (19 of 31) thought arguments / relationship breakdown within the family was a common or very common factor

### Arguments with parents

Young people contacting Missing People's helpline referenced arguments with their parent or parents as something that was influencing them to want to go missing, or to actually go missing.

Some young people referred to arguments more generally, and the fact that they were making them unhappy or frustrated at home. Others referenced the arguments escalating to a point where they felt unsafe or scared at home, and needing to get away from that

environment. Sometimes this reached a level of emotional abuse.

For others, they shared that while there might not have been big arguments at home, they were feeling unsupported or unloved by their parents or other people they were living with, including grandparents and siblings. Some young people spoke about experiencing challenges in their life, such as issues with school, exams or relationships, but not feeling like they could talk to anyone at home about it, and this making them feel uncared for.

#### Case study

*KC\*, 14, contacting Missing People to let us know that she was thinking about running away from home. They were feeling unsafe because of arguments going on at home, and were feeling really upset because of the level of arguments they were having with their mum. KC wanted advice about how to talk to her social worker about what was happening and what could be done to help her mum and her argue less.*

### Being unhappy in care placements

For some young people contacting Missing People, their unhappiness in their care placement was acting as a driver to them going missing. Reasons for this included not liking the staff at those care placements, including foster carers, or feeling isolated or lonely there.

Some referred to not getting on well with the other young people living in the placement, and of wanting to be back with their family.

### **Case study**

*Max\*, 16, contacted Missing People after their curfew had passed, when he knew he would have been reported missing by staff at his care home. Max was unhappy where he was living because he had not made good connections with the other young people living there, and did not like the staff at the care home. He wanted to stay out overnight so that he did not have to go back to somewhere he felt so unhappy.*

This was also identified by professionals completing the survey.

*“Another factor that can influence children to go missing is going to see family that they are not allowed to live with” – professional survey*

*“Children in care wanting to spend time with family” - professional survey*

### **Being kicked out**

Some young people contacting Missing People had been kicked out of home by their parents. This might be due to ongoing arguments at home, or disagreements about how the young person wants to spend their time. Some disclosed that their parents did not ‘approve’ of relationships that they were in, or that they had been kicked out following disclosures linked to their gender or sexuality.

### **Bereavement**

Experiencing a bereavement was referenced by some of the young people contacting Missing People. Young people referenced the death of a grandparent or another family

member in particular, and struggling with the impacts of that.

A small number of children referenced the death of a close friend.

For some, they disclosed significant impacts of the bereavement, including things like self-harming and negative impacts on their mental health. These young people were struggling to talk to people in their lives, including family members and people at school, about what they were feeling and the fact it was making them want to run away from home.

### **Case study**

*Casey\* has been suffering with poor mental health since her Grandfather died in 2023. While she initially received support that was very helpful, that support only lasted for a few months, and she’s been struggling ever since. Recently she has found herself feeling at crisis point and has been running away when this happens. The most recent time she left home she harmed herself while away.*

## Mental health issues

*“So it wasn't my experience, it's just it was my sister. So she's very, very, very close to me. She went missing due to mental health. She hadn't told anyone. She kept it to herself. [...]” – young person*

Previous research has shown very strong links between missing and mental health, with around 1 in 5 missing children experiencing mental ill-health.<sup>xx</sup>

Mental health was the second most commonly identified risk factor in contacts to Missing People's helpline, with 44% (244 of 558) of contacts having some evidence of this. Professionals agreed: 73% (23 of 31) thought mental health was a common or very common factor influencing children to go missing.

### Case study

*Hanna\* wanted to run away from home. She was having a difficult time at school, especially in the lead up to exams. There was an incident last week which resulted in Hanna being suspended. She was feeling very overwhelmed by the situation and didn't feel able to talk to her family or friends about it, and was feeling a real urge to run away*

Young people contacting Missing People spoke of a wide range of mental health issues that were having an impact on their feelings around going missing, sometimes resulting in them going missing.

Young people disclosed feeling anxiety or low mood about various things going on in their lives. This included not getting on well with other family members, feeling stressed at school and about exams, and being bullied at school.

A number of young people disclosed feeling isolated and lonely, and the negative impact that this was having on their mental health.

There are many underlying reasons why young people may be experiencing mental ill health that is then playing a role in making them want to go missing. However, it is clear in contacts from young people that whatever the reason, they feel a real push to get away from the situation that is making them feel that way.

Many young people referenced not having anyone to talk to about what they were feeling, whether that be friends, family, or professionals who were involved in their lives. Some young people were on waitlists for support from services such as CAMHS, whereas others had already had support and found it did not meet their needs.

Some young people were resistant to reaching out to services such as charity helplines or social services because of previous negative experiences or due to not trusting those services. There was some fear and hesitancy because they were worried about what might happen if they spoke to professionals, including worries about the situation potentially being made worse.

*Yeah, I'd like to add another risk as well, like of the missing persons mental health, like a lot of the time, I know, like from my experience and from other people's like after they've run away and they've returned, nothing happens. Like they don't get support. In like therapies or counselling and stuff like that, which I think should happen because like mental health can be like the biggest reason why they're running away in the 1st place and running away as well can affect their mental health. Like when they return, their mental will be worse. – young person*

## Exploitation

Previous research has shown very strong links between missing and exploitation, both sexual and criminal.<sup>xxi</sup>

This was evident in the records reviewed for this research:

- 41% (228 of 558) helpline records had evidence of risks linked to exploitation or harm. However, only a small proportion of these cases were specifically linked to criminal or sexual exploitation: less than 4% (21 of 558) of cases had evidence of risks of undefined exploitation; 2% (11 of 558) of sexual exploitation and less than 1% (4 of 558) of criminal exploitation. The other factors included in this type of risk include bullying, domestic abuse, and homelessness.
- In return home interview records, 40% (78 of 196) of children showed evidence of risks around sexual exploitation, and 35% (69 of 196) showed risks of criminal exploitation. 36% (70 of 196) showed risks of exploitation, but it was not clear whether this was sexual or criminal. Many of the young people were experiencing risks linked to multiple forms of exploitation. This higher prevalence than in those contacts to the Helpline is likely due to the fact that this particular cohort of young people are those who were at high risk of repeat missing. It is likely that the risks around exploitation are higher than that levels of harm experienced in missing episodes partly because the child may not have actively come to harm during that episode. However, they remain at risk of harm due to the risks they are experiencing linked to exploitation. There are also likely issues linked to disclosures, particularly where

children do not feel safe enough to tell a professional what has happened while they were missing

- For professionals completing the survey, 77% (24 of 31) thought factors linked criminal exploitation were common or very common factors in influencing children to go missing; 57% (18 of 31) thought the same about sexual exploitation

Those answering the survey for this research were asked how common various factors are in influencing a child to go missing. Factors linked to criminal and sexual exploitation were thought to be common influences by more than half of those responding to the survey.

In your experience, how common are the following factors in influencing children to go missing? In the scale below 1 means 'very rare' and 5 means 'very common'. Proportion of those selecting 4 or 5 (n. 31)



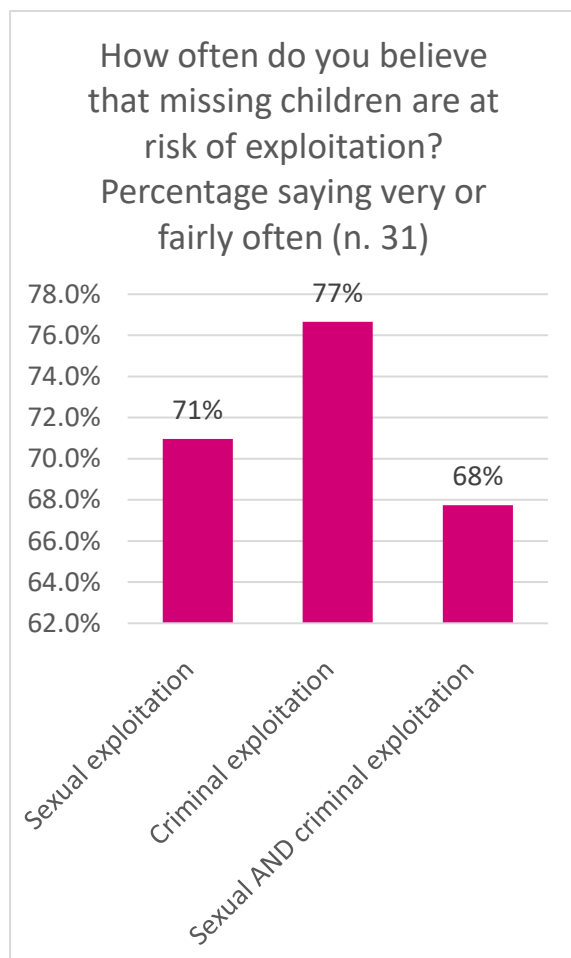
As may be expected given the information above, over half of professionals thought that factors linked to sexual or criminal exploitation

were common influences in children going missing. More professionals thought that criminal exploitation was a common factor, with over 3 in 4 saying this was the case, compared to just over 1 in 2 when considering sexual exploitation.

*“CSE, young person being exploited by older peers” – professional*

*“All young people I work with who have had missing episodes are those who as children have experienced high levels of trauma and child abuse / exploitation and are extremely vulnerable to ongoing abuse and exploitation” – professional*

Similarly, when children are missing, most professionals believed that they are at risk of exploitation very or fairly often:



Young people taking part in this research also shared their concerns about exploitation and missing, referencing friends that they had had who had gone missing linked to criminal exploitation.

*“I’m I think for me there’s obviously going to be concern for the person, but with the person who I knew that’s like gone missing, I didn’t know them. I wasn’t that close to them, but I felt very angry because I knew they were exploited criminally and due to like county lines [...] Like, because I remember seeing it, you know, my phone pop up missing person and I was just there like I know with that kid like and it was just horrible like. And my heart just sank.” – young person*

*“Yeah, but to be fair, I have known someone to run away and they ran away to go be in a gang and do drugs. So I don’t really. I don’t know. But I think he felt maybe he. Didn’t belong at home, so then he felt he fitted in more with this guy. Then he went and ran away and then he was gone for weeks with them. But now luckily he’s changed around his life, which is good.” – young person*

## Suicide and self-harm

There were over 7,000 registered deaths by suicide in the UK in 2024.<sup>xxii</sup> While the majority of suicides are related to adults, suicide is a leading cause of death in children and young people, with around 200 young people dying by suicide every year.<sup>xxiii</sup> In 2022, suicide was the leading cause of death for people aged 5-35, with 3 in 4 of those dying by suicide being boys or young men.

Many more children will be experiencing feelings of suicide or suicide ideation. Research has shown high that, amongst children experiencing poor mental health, there are high rates of suicidal ideation. Research conducted in Scotland found that a quarter of children referred to mental health services in Scotland had been thinking or had attempted suicide<sup>xxiv</sup>; more broadly a study from the University of Bristol found that 9.6% of adolescents had experienced suicidal thoughts and 6.8% had made a suicide attempt at age 16 years.<sup>xxv</sup>

Many of the risk factors for suicide are similar to those for missing, including: mental health; bullying; social isolation; and relationship problems.<sup>xxvi</sup>

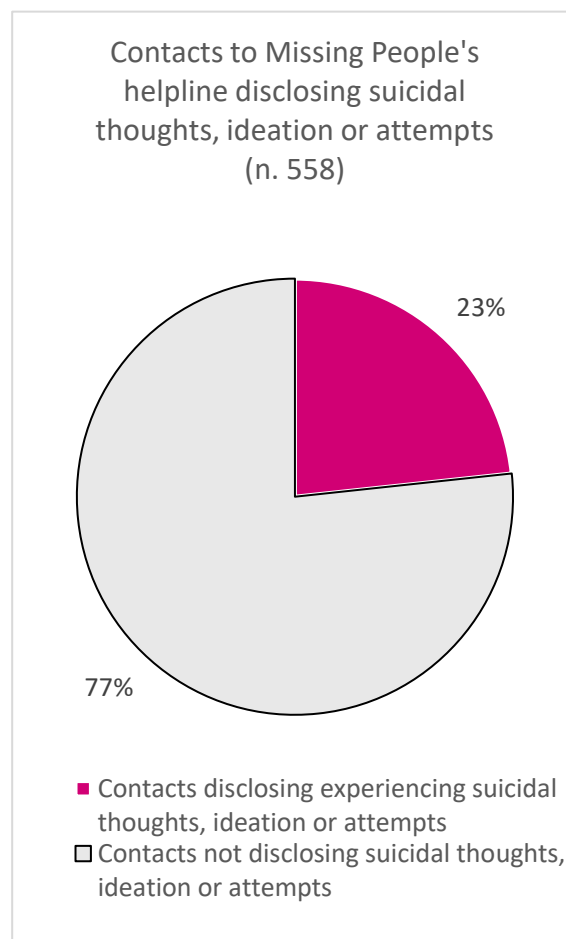
### Suicide risks

In this research, harm linked to suicide while missing was identified in a relatively small number of records. It was most commonly identified in helpline records, with 4% of the records reviewed showing evidence of a suicide attempt or suicidal intention while missing. In police and local authority data risks of suicide were very rarely recorded.

However, risks around suicide and self-harm were some of the most commonly identified risks for those young people contacting Missing People's helpline.

Of the 558 contacts reviewed, in 23% (130), the young person spoke about feelings of suicide, suicidal intent, or having attempted suicide in the past. This was the fourth most

common type of risk factor disclosed in contacts to the helpline, following relationship, home and family issues (53%, or 293 contacts), mental health issues (44%, or 244 contacts), and factors linked to exploitation and harm (41%, or 228 contacts).



In addition to feelings around suicide, nearly 1 in 10 children disclosed self-harming or thinking of self-harming (9%, or 53 of 558 contacts).

For professionals completing the survey for this research, 42% (13 of 31) thought that experiencing suicidal thoughts or ideation was a common or very common factor in influencing children to go missing; and 36% (11 of 31) thought that factors related to self-harm were a common or very common factor.

*“Over the last 12 months there appears to have been an increase in*

*young people expressing a desire to harm themselves” – professional*

*“Self-harm, where young people are suffering from mental health concerns and feel they have no one to talk to” – professional*

Young people highlighted concerns about mental health and suicide as being something that would particularly worry them if one of their friends was to go missing.

*“For me, usually when a friend of mine goes missing, I immediately first worry about the mental illness, mainly towards like someone who may struggle with suicidal thoughts. Typically, I've had experience for my friends who do have those issues, and if one of them went missing, I'd be like absolutely having a panic attack over it.” – Young person*

*“Oh, OK with this person in particular, there's the risk that they might end their life either on purpose or by accident as well.” – young person*

### **Reasons for feeling suicidal**

While some of the children contacting Missing People did not provide any detail about why they were feeling suicidal, others spoke about what was making them feel that way.

#### *Being unhappy at home or in care*

Children spoke about being unhappy where they were living, whether that was in their family home or in care. There were frequent examples of older children having been threatened with being kicked out for various reasons. For many of those contacting Missing People, this had resulted in significant feelings of stress, sometimes to the extent of experiencing feelings of suicide.

Children referenced arguments happening at home. This was often arguments that they were having with their parents or carers, but was sometimes arguments between siblings or between parents or carers. Where children were experiencing feelings of suicide these arguments appeared to be particularly acute and were having a significant impact on the children's feelings. For some, there was domestic violence at home and they had witnessed physical and emotional abuse.

Others spoke of feeling very isolated at home and feeling that they can never do anything right. Children referenced feeling isolated because they had different beliefs or religions to their families, or that they were being pressured to get good exam results, or that their parents were very restrictive. Some children spoke of their families not understanding or supporting them linked to factors such as sexuality or gender identity.

Some spoke of being very unhappy where they were living in care. This was sometimes linked to their relationship with their carers, other people where they were living, or feeling restricted in what they could do. For a small number of children, they spoke about being very worried about the prospect of going into care, and this was causing a significant amount of distress.

#### *Mental health crisis*

As may be expected in relation to disclosures of feeling suicidal, there was significant crossover with experiences of poor mental health or mental health crisis. Some contacts spoke of having previously attempted to take their own life, while others had recently been in mental health in-patient care.

#### *Social life*

Some spoke of experiencing challenges linked to their social life. Some children spoke of being bullied at school, whether that be emotional bullying or physical bullying. Others spoke of having very few or no friends, and of feeling very isolated.

### *Bereavement*

A specific thing that was disclosed by some children that was making them experience feelings of suicide was having suffered a bereavement. Children referenced the death of close family members, including grandparents and parents in some cases, and the significant impact that this had had on the child. Some of these deaths had themselves been deaths by suicide.

### *Challenges with accessing support*

A number of children specifically mentioned not being able to access support linked to why they were feeling suicidal. There were references to not having anyone to talk to in general, as well as being worried about talking to parents and other family members. Some referenced previous negative experiences with professionals which were acting as a barrier to reaching out to those professionals for help. Children spoke of information having been shared with other people in the past without their consent, not being taken seriously when sharing their concerns or experiences, and fearing the consequences that may follow if they do talk to professionals.

# Conclusion

It is clear from these findings that missing children are often experiencing complex situations, that can include a range of harms that drive them to go missing, and that they can go missing in situations where they are at risk of coming to harm while away.

The range of factors that missing children are experiencing, and may be influencing them to go missing, is particularly notable and may put them at higher risk of harm while missing. These factors range from mental ill-health to criminal and sexual exploitation to feelings of suicide and self-harm.

This research shows that more children are coming to harm while missing than is currently captured in official statistics. While the different data sources used for this research contained different prevalence rates, all are higher than the data currently contained in the National Crime Agency statistics. However, it is likely that the data in this research remains an under-representation of the true scale of harm experienced by missing children. There are significant barriers to disclosure of harm when children return from being missing, and while better recording of known risks and harms can go some way to filling these gaps, the data will always give an imperfect picture. In qualitative research, both professionals and children thought that rates of harm were higher, further suggesting that there is an issue with recording as well as disclosure. The young people taking part in this research were clear that they would be concerned if someone they knew went missing, and they would be worried about the harm that they may experience.

The response to missing children must recognise this higher prevalence of harms, and the different types of harm that children are exposed to, including physical harm and harm linked to suicide and self-harm. When a

child returns from being missing the assumption should not be that they have suffered no harm simply because they have returned or do not have visible signs of physical injury. Rather, professionals who engage with the child on return should meaningfully explore the missing incident with the child, including whether they came to harm. Professionals should recognise the barriers that may exist to disclosing harm, but this should not prevent professionals from engaging with the child to understand their unique experiences and what support they may need.

Going missing is often a symptom of something that is going on in the person's life. Being missing can exacerbate those things, particularly if the child comes to harm.

Return should not be seen as the end of the story. It should be a clear opportunity for children to get the help that they need with why they went missing and anything that may have happened when they were away. It is also a key point at which steps can be taken to try to prevent the child going missing again, limiting their exposure to further risk and harm.

There is an overarching need for support to be available for children before they go missing, when they are away, and when they return, in order to reduce the risks of harms that can be experienced throughout the duration of their missing episode.

## Appendix A: Professional survey participants

In what capacity do you work with / engage with children who go missing		
Answer	Number of responses	Percentage of responses
Third sector staff or volunteer	11	35%
Local authority staff	7	23%
Police	4	13%
Residential care staff	2	6%
Youth worker	2	6%
In another capacity	5	16%

## Appendix B: Harm data tables

Missing People helpline records (n. 199)			
Type of harm while away	Number of cases	Percentage of total cases	Percentage of cases where harm was identified
Total harm	30	15.1%	100%
Suicide attempt / intentions	8	4.0%	26.7%
Self-harm	2	1.0%	6.7%
Physical harm	13	6.5%	43.3%
Emotional or psychological harm	3	1.5%	10.0%
Sexual harm	1	0.5%	3.3%
Harm linked to exploitation	5	2.5%	16.7%

Return home interview records (n. 498)			
Type of harm while away	Number of cases	Percentage of total cases	Percentage of cases where harm was identified
Total harm	58	11.6%	100%

<b>Suicide attempt / intentions</b>	2	0.4%	3.4%
<b>Self-harm</b>	7	1.4%	12.1%
<b>Physical harm</b>	19	3.8%	32.8%
<b>Emotional or psychological harm</b>	21	4.2%	36.2%
<b>Sexual harm</b>	9	1.8%	15.5%
<b>Harm linked to exploitation</b>	28	5.6%	48.3%

<b>Local authority data</b>				
<b>Type of harm</b>	<b>Number of LAs sharing data</b>	<b>Number of missing incidents</b>	<b>Number of incidents where harm was identified</b>	<b>Percentage of incidents where harm was identified</b>
<b>Total harm</b>	29	25,803	1,723	6.7%
<b>Physical harm</b>	19	12,864	295	2.3%
<b>Sexual harm</b>	19	12,246	140	1.1%
<b>Self-harm</b>	16	8,714	232	2.7%
<b>Suicide harm</b>	16	8,714	16	0.2%
<b>Emotional / psychological harm</b>	18	10,613	236	2.2%

<b>Police data</b>				
<b>Type of harm</b>	<b>Number of police forces sharing data</b>	<b>Number of missing incidents</b>	<b>Number of incidents where harm was identified</b>	<b>Percentage of incidents where harm was identified</b>
<b>Total harm</b>	15	49,054	3,173	6.5%
<b>Physical harm</b>	15	49,054	763	1.6%
<b>Sexual harm</b>	15	49,054	325	0.7%
<b>Self-harm</b>	15	49,054	777	1.6%
<b>Suicide harm</b>	10	26,768	0	0.0%

<b>Emotional / psychological harm</b>	13	40,896	160	0.4%
<b>Accidental harm</b>	10	39,592	254	0.6%

<sup>i</sup> There were almost 210,000 missing incidents relating to children in 2023-24. National Crime Agency, UK Missing Persons Unit, *Missing Persons Data Report 2023/24*, <https://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/images/mpu/downloads/UKMPU%20Annual%20Data%20Report%202023-24.pdf>.

<sup>ii</sup> See, for example, ECPAT UK and Missing People, *Away and at risk: The scale of exploitation children going missing from care in the UK, 2018-2020*, <https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Exploitation-report-FINAL.pdf>; The All-Party Parliamentary Group for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults, *No place at home: Risks facing children and young people who go missing from out of area placements*, September 2019, <https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-10/no-place-at-home.pdf>; Missing People, *A Safer Return: An analysis of the value of return home interviews in identifying risk and ensuring returning missing children are supported*, June 2019, [https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/A\\_Safer\\_Return-full.pdf](https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/A_Safer_Return-full.pdf).

<sup>iii</sup> See, for example, The All-Party Parliamentary Group for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults, *No place at home: Risks facing children and young people who go missing from out of area placements*, September 2019, <https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-10/no-place-at-home.pdf>; Missing People, *A Safer Return: An analysis of the value of return home interviews in identifying risk and ensuring returning missing children are supported*, June 2019, [https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/A\\_Safer\\_Return-full.pdf](https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/A_Safer_Return-full.pdf); Berelowitz, S. et al, *'I thought I was the only one. The only one in the world.'* *The Office of the Children's Commissioner's Inquiry into child sexual exploitation in gangs and groups*, 2012.

<sup>iv</sup> See, for example, Hunter, J. & Duran, L., *Until Harm Ends: An update report on trafficked and unaccompanied children going missing from care in the UK*, Missing People and ECPAT UK, November 2025, <https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/Until-Harm-Ends-2025.pdf>

<sup>v</sup> See, for example, The All-Party Parliamentary Group for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults, *No place at home: Risks facing children and young people who go missing from out of area placements*, September 2019, <https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-10/no-place-at-home.pdf>; Hunter, J. et al, *An exploration of the links between, and responses to, parental conflict and children going missing*, Missing People, March 2026, [https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/MP-Parental-conflict\\_AW.pdf](https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/MP-Parental-conflict_AW.pdf).

<sup>vi</sup> Department for Education, *Statistics: Looked-after children*, <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/statistics-looked-after-children>.

<sup>vii</sup> Hunter, J., Allan, J., and Rickford, R., *The ethnicity of missing people: findings from police and local authority data, 2021-22*, Missing People, [https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Missing\\_Ethnicity-report.pdf](https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Missing_Ethnicity-report.pdf).

<sup>viii</sup> National Crime Agency, Missing Persons Unit, *Missing Persons Data Report 2022-23*, <https://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/images/mpu/downloads/UKMPU%20Statistical%20Report%202022-2023.pdf>

<sup>ix</sup> Doyle, R. *Which missing persons come to harm and can we identify them beforehand? A retrospective analysis of cases reported to Devon & Cornwall Police*, University of Cambridge Institute of Criminology, 2019, <https://library.college.police.uk/docs/theses/DOYLE-Which-missing-persons-harm-can-identify-them-2020.pdf>.

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<sup>xi</sup> <https://www.n8prp.org.uk/2024/04/05/too-risky-yet-not-risky-enough-new-research-on-seriously-harmed-missing-children/>

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