“I will always talk about them”

The experiences of family members whose loved one has died while missing

missing people

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

Research by Sarah Allan, Christina Conolly, Jane Hunter, Ray Lee and Ross Paterson

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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 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.

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, and recent research can be found at www.missingpeople.org.uk/for-professionals/information-and-policy/information-and-research

Thank you

An advisory group was formed to provide guidance in conducting this research. The group was composed of Missing People staff and two family members who have experience of their loved one dying while they were missing. Thank you to members of this group, particularly the family members who so honestly and graciously shared their views and guided the project.

Thank you to all of those who took part in this research and shared their experiences so openly and generously with us.

Introduction and methodology

Background

Around 170,000 people are reported missing to the police in the UK each year in 350,000 incidents:[i] someone is reported missing every 90 seconds.[ii]

While many missing people will experience some form of harm while missing, in most incidents the missing person is found or returned 'safe and well.' However, around 1,000 people die each year while they are missing.[iii] This number has increased significantly in recent years and is higher than the number of people who die by homicide each year.[iv]

The cause of death varies, and includes accidents, health related incidents, and deaths linked to crime. However, most often the person will have died due to suicide: up to 80% of fatalities are the result of known or suspected suicide.[v] In some cases, the body will be found quickly, giving families and communities closure, while in others it could be weeks, months or years until they know what has happened to their missing person.

Research aims

Missing People charity supports family members and communities affected by a disappearance, including those who have suffered the death of a missing loved one. Many of those who have been bereaved will initially have been supported by the charity while their family member was missing but before a body was found.

However, very little is currently known about this specific type of experience. The emotional and practical impacts of a loved one dying while missing are not fully understood. This means little is known about the support needs for people in this situation, including how missing-related bereavement and support may differ from other types of bereavement.

In this research, Missing People aims to:

- Understand more about the experiences of family members from the time their loved one initially went missing to the time their body was found
- Understand broadly what support is needed for families during this time
- Understand Missing People's specific role in supporting families when their loved one is found to have died while missing

Methodology

This is a small scale, exploratory study, aimed at providing an account of the ways in which missing-related bereavement can affect a missing person's family member.

A working group was established to guide this research, comprised of a small number of Missing People staff and volunteers and two family members who have experience of their loved one dying while missing.

Qualitative in-depth interviews were conducted with 8 adult participants, all of whom have received support from Missing People at some stage.

A semi-structured interview style was followed, retrospectively investigating participants' emotional and practical support needs at different stages of their experience. A thematic analysis was then conducted to extract reoccurring themes across all responses. These themes have been presented to provide a general overview of participants' emotional experiences and have been used to inform the recommendations offered in this report.

What is missing?

In England and Wales the definition of a missing person is: *"Anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established will be considered as missing until located and their wellbeing or otherwise confirmed."*

This definition is used primarily by police forces in determining whether to record and respond to someone as a missing person, but exactly how they respond will be an operational decision depending on the circumstances of the missing episode.

Depending on the circumstances, other agencies may be involved in responding. This is particularly the case when someone goes missing from care settings, including children and adult care homes, and health care settings.

Those who are not reported to the police as missing are sometimes referred to as 'the missing missing.' They are not captured in the official statistics about missing, and the support that they should be offered will never be triggered in the frameworks or mechanisms that exist for those who are reported missing to the police.

At Missing People our use of 'missing' more broadly includes: *"when people leave where they have been living or staying without telling or be able to tell other people where they have gone. This might be described as 'going missing,' 'disappearing,' 'running away,' or 'taking time out.' It might include being away from home, care, a hospital, or a mental heath care setting."*

Research findings

Family experiences and needs while the person was missing

Previous research has explored the impact of having a missing loved one. Family members experience significant impacts on their emotional wellbeing linked to the trauma of their loved one's disappearance. [vi]

They also face significant practical challenges, some linked to the financial and legal implications of their loved one being missing, and others linked to their experiences dealing with the police, other agencies and the media.

Many of the experiences felt by the families taking part in this research are commonly expressed by families of missing people in many varied circumstances.

Before going missing

While ultimately those taking part in the research all experienced the same outcome, the circumstances leading up to the missing episode, and the missing episode itself, varied greatly.

"[Discussing young men taking their own life] *Very often there are no signs […] it just happens"*

For some, the missing episode was regarded as unexpected and unusual, with the disappearance being characterised as being very much out of character.

For some this meant that they were not initially worried.

"[We] thought he might be at work, or out with his mates."

For others, there had been at least an inkling that all was not well. For example, one person had been missing briefly on several occasions before the final fatal incident, and in another situation a family member had been perceived to have been acting strangely before going missing.

"There were clearly some things not going right at university"

Help had been sought in some of these situations, including seeking a mental health assessment in one case.

The missing episode

At the point their loved one went missing, families spoke about finding it difficult to fathom what had happened. Their initial reaction was of shock, disbelief, lack of direction, helplessness and isolation.

"Horrific is not even a strong enough word to describe it."

Some found it difficult to put their emotions into words, with one person speaking of their feelings at that time as being "*indescribable*", and another of being "*beside myself*."

"The very worst period is the missing bit, I mean that is the worst of the worst, worst, worst, I found."

For one family member, the resources that were available gave them optimism and hope that their son would be found.

"I still had that hope that the police team would find him. Because they had mountain rescue. They had the lifeboat. They had all the volunteers."

However, for most, the situation was characterised by unpredictability and uncertainty. There was significant concern that their loved one would not be found.

"He may never be found because this is what happens. That was really, really difficult."

The ambiguity that families were feeling while their loved one was missing was significant. In a situation where *"everything is unpredictable"*, family members were left with feelings of helplessness and not knowing what to do or how to proceed. The strength of feeling in relation to this was clear.

"I felt at one point like I was living somebody else's life or/and that I was in a living nightmare that would just never end."

Some felt isolated in this situation, wanting to talk to people about the disappearance but not knowing how to.

"Because you're in such a panic and you need, you need to talk to somebody, I think. And sometimes it's like really hard to talk to your family and your children and things because, well, at that stage as well, you just think they're going to be found."

Ambiguous loss

In the 1970s the American psychologist Pauline Boss coined the term 'ambiguous loss' to refer to situations where a disjunction exists between someone's physical presence in a social relationship and their psychological presence in that relationship. Where someone is in a coma, for example, they remain physically present to family members but are psychologically absent.

In cases where someone goes missing, the missing person is physically absent but, for those left behind, remains psychologically present. Ambiguities of this kind, Boss suggested, lead to 'unresolved grief' (1999), a situation in which the absence of closure produces sustained psychological pressure, which in extreme cases can be traumatic.

When someone is missing that ambiguity is capable of being resolved and closure obtained by their safe return. Where that person has died, however, resolution is achieved at horrendous cost to those left behind. Their loss is no longer ambiguous but confirmed, real, and palatable.

Trauma

"[It was] all a bit of a blur. I was very stressed. And it was all very traumatic."

In psychology, trauma arises from one, multiple, or repeated exposure to a life-threatening event.[vii]

Ambiguous loss and missing are closely associated with trauma because they can be painful beyond normal human expectation. There is a lack of social or religious rituals to cope with this type of loss, and individuals can enter a state of limbo without the typical support for grieving.

People confronted with a loved one being missing could struggle physically as well as emotionally. *"I was not sleeping. I was very overwhelmed,"* said one, while another described how *"When my son first went missing all I could do was lie on the sofa. I was like a blob of jelly. I could not function."*

Where the missing episode has lasted for a long time, the emotional impact is persistent and the associated distress continues for an undefined period of time. Family members spoke of this kind of situation as "*traumatising*." Another spoke of life being "*turned upside down*" and of not knowing where her son was as "*very traumatic*" and "*unpredictable*."

Support while having a missing loved one

While their loved one was missing, families expressed a significant need for support. Their needs were primarily in relation to their mental wellbeing, with many trying to access therapeutic counselling. Some mentioned practical support, however this was emphasised less so than emotional support and mental wellbeing.

Support with emotional wellbeing

"It's a minefield where support is concerned. Minefield"

Many family members sought support, such as counselling, from local services. However, many were unable to access this type of support due to factors including:

- Resource constraints
- Pressure on local services
- Lack of availability of any relevant services
- Long waiting lists

"It took [charity name] about a year to get in touch with me, to follow up. By that point, I was like 'stuff it'"

Where support was available, it often did not meet expectations. There was a lack of expertise in dealing with the psychological consequences of having a loved one go missing, with agencies generally having very little familiarity with issues related to missing persons.

"I referred myself to the NHS for CBT while he was gone, and the lady that I got, she clearly was in the wrong job."

Agencies that families expected to have a good understanding of missing and the impact that it had on families did not have that understanding. One interviewee, who had discovered the work of Pauline Boss, found that local support services *"knew nothing about ambiguous loss."*

Another said, *"I reached out to victim services […], but they were still very oriented towards helping people […] where they believed there was a crime […] so it was a different set of guidelines that, or mandate that they were working from that wasn't fit."*

As might be expected, the police were not in a position to provide emotional support to families. One family reported that they had reached out to the police in this connection but found *"they had no services whatsoever."*

Another interviewee *"felt more supported by [charity] than I did by my local police force."*

A number of families had accessed therapeutic support from Missing People's counselling team, or had had support from the charity's family support team, and had found it to be very valuable. A consistent offer of support was highlighted as being critical.

For families who were living with the unpredictability and trauma of having a missing loved one, the ability to speak to the same person on a regular basis was absolutely critical.

"This is what I want to stress. That I found so crucial. Because when your life is turned upside down and you are not sleeping, and you do not know where your son is. It is very traumatic, and everything is unpredictable. The predictability of hearing [support worker]'s voice every time […] you do not want to have to keep explaining your situation over and over again. You are traumatised and stressed enough as it is."

The importance of scheduling the next time they were going to talk was really important, but so was the fact that this could be cancelled if the family member was not feeling up to it: *"to me that was absolutely crucial."*

"Things that I've been able to verbalise within the safety of Missing People that I didn't feel I could do with other people, has been amazing"

"I had [support worker name] from very early on, even to the point where I had a phone call off her on Christmas Day that first year, you know, so that support was there immediately. […] I wouldn't be here without you guys"

Police response

"The police are stretched. I get that. But I can say that now, two years later.

But at the time, if I am being totally frank, it was a bit frustrating"

Some families shared that they had had a negative experience with the police. This was sometimes expressed in general terms: *"So, the police… Again, I don't mean to badmouth, and I don't like badmouthing them. I always used to respect them. I don't anymore"*, while another person said, *"I would say organization-wise, yeh, police were bloody useless."*

Making that initial report was challenging for some, particularly where the initial contact was made via 101. One family was told they had to wait for 24 hours before making the missing report, something that is not true. There were frustrations with needing to retell their story multiple times to different people.

"It's very difficult to get the message across to people and the problem with 101 is you end up with a different person each time […] to start with we were basically told, 'oh well, you know, he hasn't been missing 24 hours and we only really do anything after 24 hours.'"

Families spoke of not being taken seriously and needing to continue to advocate for their missing person to be considered high risk.

Beyond this, there were also criticisms about how the police had managed the missing investigation and their interactions in general with family members. One family member, for example, felt aggrieved because: *"Then they sent some random bloke […] to my house... He was disrespectful... didn't know anything about J, didn't know anything about the case, didn't know anything about us."*

There were challenges with the police response when the investigation involved two different police forces, leading to the investigation being very disjointed.

"[There were problems with] getting through to the right person in the police to start with and having a single point of contact, and also the police forces not being able or willing or whatever to communicate between themselves and no follow up"

However, this was by no means universal, with some having a positive experience with the police and those who were searching for their missing person.

"[The police] were considerate and kind […] but we had to establish that relationship with them for that to materialise."

For one family, they felt like the police were not taking their situation seriously, however once they were able to share information that accurately reflected the risks their loved one was facing the response was much better: *"The moment that you get risk elevated, then their attitude changes completely […] someone obviously knew what he was talking about, about what they were doing and what they were finding."*

Family experiences on discovering their loved one had died while missing

For all families taking part in this research, their loved one's missing episode had sadly ended with their death and their body being found.

Families described a range of emotions they had experienced upon learning that their loved one had died. These included, panic, guilt, confusion, anger, grief and relief.

Some of these were especially prevalent, particularly grief, relief and closure.

Grief

> *"We talk about grief being frozen, but what does that mean? […] we're totally different and maybe grief is more individual than we think"*

For some, the grief was particularly intense. One family member spoke of *"going through so much grief and trauma"*, and of those emotions being *"so raw for so long."*

For others, *"there was a lot of haze around"* the period when their loved one's remains had been found.

Relief and closure

Some did experience significant relief at knowing that their loved one had died after not knowing for so long.

This sense of relief is further explored when considering how missing-related bereavement differs from other types of bereavement.

> *"What I was experiencing, I believe when he was found, was such a relief that I now know I have what I call "The Big Answer", and that just relieved me of everything.*

Experiences of closure varied for family members. Some did recognise the possibility of closure, which was welcomed because the *"torture"* of not knowing had come to an end, but there was also a sense that reactions were not or even should not be predictable.

However, some did not seem to experience closure at this stage. This was partly because people felt emotionally overwhelmed, and partly because there was a need to deal with a range of practical challenges that then arose.

Continued ambiguity

"You may not know all the whys and wherefores"

The bereavement process for families was prolonged, and families continued to experience feelings of uncertainty and ambiguity even though they ultimately knew what had happened to their loved one.

This ambiguity included not knowing how their loved one had died, when their loved one died, and what they were thinking or feeling at that time.

"And I think it's kind of, it's that, it's that you might still have lots of things which you're never going to find answers to."

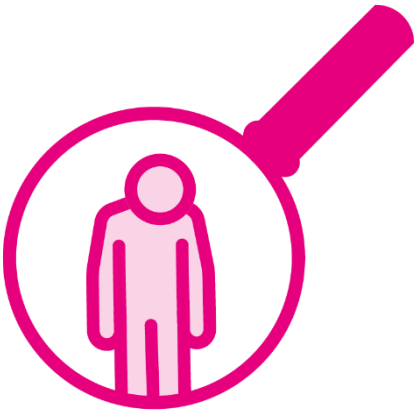
There may have been questions about whether a third party had been involved, or whether their loved one had been in pain or scared.

These unanswered questions prevented some family members from being able to experience closure, even when their loved one's body had been found.

For a number of people there were also questions about whether they could have done something different, and what they might have been able to do to produce a different outcome. Some questioned themselves, sometimes being self-critical about themselves or their relationship with their loved one.

"… if I could just learn, you know, from other people's experiences, do they have the same kind of questions? You know, do they get mad at themselves? Do they get frustrated? Umm. And I think to have a safe space like that as well, sort of like a rage room in a way, but not a rage room."

"Because that's the big thing that you didn't see it coming and you feel so guilty that you couldn't… How can that have happened under your own nose, you see what I mean?"



Impact on day to day living

"It was very traumatic to carry on living in the village where he went missing […] Every time I drove past the fire station, I would have flash backs. Because that was the rendezvous point for the search."

Everyday things, as well as things that could be linked to their loved one, had a triggering impact on family members.

This was particularly the case for those who continued to live or spend time in the area their loved one had gone missing from, and where people felt others in the community would talk about or be very interested in their situation.

The rawness and persistence of their grief and trauma led one person to feel that they would not have been able to cope *"with other people talking about it,"* while a third said of the prospect of attending an inquest: *"But to hear everything and to know that someone from the local press is going to be there. That just kind of made all the trauma come up again. Well not that it had really gone away at that point."*

Comparison with other bereavements

"I think if, if anything, traditional bereavement stuff doesn't sit with me anymore."

Asked about how their loved one's death while missing had differed from other bereavements they might have suffered, family members had varying views.

For some of those interviewed, there was a sense that they had not gone through a 'typical' bereavement.

One spoke of not grieving, but of being stuck in effect in a complex web of feelings: *"We were, are, living in limbo. And don't tell me that I'm grieving because my grief is frozen. I can't grieve."*

The fact that there is continuing ambiguity differentiated missing-related bereavement from other types of bereavement for some.

One person spoke of not being able to grieve because of *"the fact that you've possibly still got lots of unanswered questions. Umm, so you know, why did he go missing? How did he die? You know, you will never actually know after this length of time, you know, the body was found. And why was he in that location 150 miles from home?"*

For some, the removal of ambiguity from the situation had affected how they grieved.

One family member said *"I don't think I was [grieving], because I still had that little*

glimmer of hope. […] I was likely grieving in those three and a half years, but in a different way than a normal grief."

For another, *"I don't know, I might be, you know an abnormality or something? I don't know, but it was such a relief. It was such a relief that I didn't even think of, you know, mourning or grieving or bereaving. It just didn't matter. It didn't matter at that stage of the game to me."*

One family decided to have a celebration of life for their loved one. He had been *"full of life and he always loved large parties. He loved large people… "Making it a happy event, I look at death quite differently. And you know, but somehow, we're trained to be sad. Umm, about death. In reality, we should be celebrating it because it's just another event in the continuum. We celebrate births. Why don't we celebrate deaths? And some societies do."*

"So I think if people have the freedom to go with what makes them strong, with what their expectations are and how they wish to accept it, acceptance is huge when it comes to dealing with ambiguous loss, so that learning too, I'm now able to carry forward with in a lot of things."

Support needs when a missing person has died

Support from family and friends

There was clearly a need for support for families' emotional and mental wellbeing. Some families spoke of the key role other family members played in supporting each other: we are *"quite close as a family […] and sort of provided each other with the support we needed at that time.*

Others spoke of feeling quite self-sufficient in terms of their own emotional wellbeing: I'm *"quite self-contained in that way."*

Family pets were highlighted by one person as being a particular comfort at that time: *"my pet cat kept me going… never left my side. And to have him to stroke on my lap, with his warmth and comfort. I took a huge strength from that. Strength that I did not know that I had."*

However, others spoke of not wanting to talk to friends and family. For some this was linked to feeling that they would not understand, or that they were now in a different place in their life.

"I don't feel like I can reach out to friends and family […] they've still got their partners, they've still got their families. You know, I'm the only one that's not got my partner."

Some also had negative experiences with friends not knowing how to react to their situation: *"It was awkward for them to talk to us once he was found […] they didn't know how to respond. And I think as*

time went on, some of those people have come back. Some have refused to talk about [loved one]. I will always talk about [loved one]."

Support from professionals

Similarly to the point at which their loved one had gone missing but not been found yet, some family members did try to get support through mental health support services or more traditional bereavement support services.

Being able to access specialist support was very important for some families, including being able to talk to people who knew about the specific experience of bereavement after missing.

"[Support service] is so specialised in their knowledge and […] so, so great at the language that [is] used"

For some, they wanted to access support that was linked more to how the person had died than the fact that they were missing when they died. For one family whose loved one had died by suicide, they wanted to access support from professionals who are expert in bereavement following suicide, not missing.

Practical support

In addition to emotional support, there was a clear need for support in dealing with practicalities around processes such as inquests and funerals.

Some spoke of the fact that they would have liked to have someone alongside them to help them to advocate for their needs or wants, and to walk them through the challenging processes that can rise following a death while missing.

"I would have loved somebody to help map out how the coroner process works […] all of that is new and nobody is there to help."

Being able to talk to someone who had experience or was expert in these processes was very important for some: *"The lady who helped me was a retired ex-judge. But she was fantastic. So, just knowing that that support is there is just…because you are having to go through all these stages that you are not prepared for and that you don't necessarily understand. So having that extra support every step of the way is just. It is just really beneficial."*

Peer support

Encouraging the bereaved to have contact with others who have undergone similar experiences is seen as important to help with the grieving process. Families welcomed being able to join spaces or activities where they could meet others in a similar situation to them.

"It's a club you don't want to join, but you're very glad you've joined it because you've got other people who understand you."

They spoke of the value in learning from others about what they had experienced, and what may be ahead of them. Some also spoke of the value they themselves felt when they were able to support other families who may have more recently suffered the bereavement of their missing loved one: *"I could probably give out quite a lot of support having already been so far."*

> *"So [it] doesn't ever leave you. Not really. But the sense that I know enough to be able to help others is what keeps me coming, what keeps me going there."*

However, for some, the emotional challenges of peer support were significant: *"I suddenly thought I cannot cope with meeting a lot of people who have been through the trauma of what I have been through […] I did not know that I would feel like that until literally the last minute […] and then I felt awful."* Others spoke of the importance of ensuring that therapeutic support is available even in peer support spaces, including the offer of a debrief if needed.

Families also shared that they felt that their experience was distinct to those whose loved one was still missing. Some felt that uncomfortable when speaking about bereavement with those who still had no news of their loved one.

> *"I'm really conscious of how I'm speaking to people whose family members are missing and are holding desperate hope that they're going to turn up, and there's me […] I don't want to be the person that they're looking at thinking: "God, I hope that's not going to be me"."*

Limitations of support

In some cases, there was disquiet that support had not been available to family members on learning that their loved one's body had been discovered. Families struggled to get the type of support that they wanted for a number of reasons.

For one family, they found out after the fact that their GP's surgery did have resources to use when someone is bereaved by suicide, which they had been, and that surgery staff were supposed to reach out to patients who have been bereaved in this way. However, no one did reach out to her; something that she was dismayed to find out.

Families also spoke of the availability of support being provided remotely, and some challenges in relation to that: *"Because when you are traumatised and stressed, and you haven't slept, the last thing you need is technological issues where you cannot logon or something."*

For a couple of people, they got to the stage where they did not want structured support anymore. For one person, they got fed up with going over their situation: *"I reached a point where I got sick of the sound of my own voice [in the counselling process] and I have kind of had enough of talking it out."*

Another felt that they should be able to get through it on their own, without the need for professional intervention: *"I'm the sort of person, and I think quite a lot of*

people are like this [who] wouldn't go to somebody else because I felt I needed help, because I'm quite a strong person and I want to sort it out myself."

The limited availability of support services was highlighted. Families referred to long waiting lists and a lack of specialist services.

Some of those who had been able to access specialist support had needed to pay for it themselves, and had struggled to find support via free resources like the NHS or charities.

"We got specialist therapy. We went private because we could afford to and because we wanted to talk to real specialists who understood our particular situation. But in the NHS it takes a year to even get started, and we've been told that there are generally problems being able to talk to the same person all the time once you do […] It must make people feel even more helpless if they don't get any professional help and right away."

The Role of Missing People: wider learnings

Missing People charity's role in supporting people whose loved one died while missing was explored as part of this research.

A separate internal recommendations paper has been developed as a result of those findings, but some are applicable more widely to the support needs of people who have this experience.

Consistency of support

It was recognised that consistency of support was very important for people with a missing loved one. In some cases,

"You just want that help. It really is a click of a button and then you are joining that face-to-face call. And with your text support service as well. You send a text and then you get a reply acknowledging it. And saying that they will get back to you. Again, I just think that is so crucial."

this may mean that Missing People charity does have a role in continuing to support people whose loved one is found to have died. Some family members shared that they had feared they would not be able to be supported by the charity anymore once their loved one had been found, and were grateful to be able to access continued support in those circumstances.

Importance of remit

For others though, they felt it may be more appropriate to try to link families with bereavement support organisations as opposed to directly providing support from Missing People.

"Missing People did offer help but your specialism is missing, not support following a bereavement. I think it's probably best for the charity to stick to the missing space"

For some, this was partly linked to the worry that there would be less resource available to support families whose loved one had not been found.

"It really detracts, quite frankly, from those people who are still looking […]"

Specialist knowledge

The specialist knowledge of missing was critical for many families. This was the case both while their loved one was missing and after their body had been found. Families spoke of the importance of getting support from those who understood the specificities of missing, whether that be from Missing People charity or elsewhere, and the negative impacts of not being able to access that specialist support.

Knowing support was there, being able to talk to other families, and to receive counselling for another family member had all proved valuable while their loved one was missing. It was the charity's familiarity with and knowledge of issues relating to missing that encouraged people to continue in contact with the charity, but with issues like bereavement, so this person thought, which might require specialist skills, there might be a need to signpost people to specialist support though this should be done on a case-by-case basis

Peer support

As discussed above, peer support was critical for many families. The value of being able to talk to people who had a similar experience was clear, throughout their experience of their loved one being missing.

"Being able to talk to other families I think was, was quite a crucial part. And I think that's what most people you know reflect on, that being able to talk to people in a similar position was always helpful."

Potential to refer

The differing circumstances, homicide, suicide, or accident, surrounding cases where a missing person has been found dead potentially raise issues in terms of the tailoring of support and its timing in both the short and long term.

"Or to some degree, walk alongside until they're at a point where they don't need that anymore."

These issues and sensitivities around support are also different to those where people are still without news of their missing loved one.

“It's always difficult duplicating knowledge isn't it? But certainly I mean I, I'm very happy to be signposted to other people who can help, but if you've had somebody go through that experience, perhaps with another client, and you can draw on that experience and, that is helpful.”

“how do you connect the dots with the agencies that are already out there, ready, willing and able to provide service?”

Factors such as these led one interviewee to suggest the use of a protocol that provided for periodic contact with the bereaved to assess their needs for support, from specialist organisations should it be necessary, and to offer a channel for the maintenance of informal ties to others similarly affected.

“I think it would be very useful to establish a pathway so, you know, that sets out what, what, what, what would happen when you move from missing to bereaved, and obviously, you know, there are the bereavements that people experience…

They are varied […] Maybe a call, a conversation, a setting out of, you know, what are the alternative pathways that - because you do feel very flooded and overwhelmed -and the offer, I think the offer of something, you know, the mention at that point.”

Conclusion

It is clear from this research that there are some commonalities in the experiences of families whose loved one has died while missing and those whose loved one has not. This is particularly the case during the early stages of the missing episode, where families spoke of their experience in very similar ways to those whose loved one eventually returns or remains missing without an outcome.

The panic, stress and trauma experienced in those early stages is common with many experiences of missing.

However, on finding out that their loved one had died, their experiences diverge significantly. While families spoke of the grief they felt, there was also a clear sense of relief and closure for some, something that families with long-term missing loved ones do not experience.

Even with an outcome, the continued ambiguity that often surrounded the death had a significant impact on some family members. This was said to be something that was notably different from other types of bereavement that family members had experienced, and something that had a lasting impact.

The support needs for this group of families is distinctly different from other types of missing and other types of bereavement, and most families had struggled to access appropriate and adequate support. It is critical that those working with families who are bereaved while their loved one is missing recognise the specificity of this type of grief.

[ii] UK Missing Persons Unit, Missing Persons Data Report 2022/23, National Crime Agency: https://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/images/mpu/downloads/UKMPU%20Annual%20Data%20Report%202022-23.pdf

[ii] Missing People charity, *Key statistics and figures*: https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/for-professionals/policy-and-research/information-and-research/key-information

[iiiiii] UK Missing Persons Unit, Missing Persons Data Report 2022/23, National Crime Agency: https://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/images/mpu/downloads/UKMPU%20Annual%20Data%20Report%202022-23.pdf

[iv] In 2023-24, there were a total of 640 deaths in the UK (see Office for National Statistics, *Homicide in England and Wales: year ending March 2024:* https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/homicideinenglandandwales/yearendingmarch2024; Scottish Government, *Homicide in Scotland 2023-24,* https://www.gov.scot/publications/homicide-scotland-2023-24/pages/main-findings/*;* Statistica, *Number of police recorded homicide offences in Northern Ireland from 2002/03 to 2023/24,* https://www.statista.com/statistics/916727/homicides-in-northern-ireland/*)*.

[v] See, for example, Missing People, "My world was falling apart", 2022: https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Final_Missing_Adults_Research.pdf, and J. Whibley et al (2023), Cause of death in fatal missing person cases in England and Wales*, International Journal of Police Science & Management,* 25(4), 422-432.

[vi] For more research about the impact of missing on families, see Missing People, Living in Limbo, 2008: https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Living_in_Limbo_2008-1.pdf, and Missing People's research library, Missing People, *Research about missing,* https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/for-professionals/policy-and-research/information-and-research/research-about-missing.

[viivii] See, for example, Mind, *What is trauma?:* https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/trauma/about-trauma/