

BLACK

&

MISSING

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

**THINKING ABOUT OUR
STORIES**

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To help bring this toolkit to life we have included a narrative from the perspectives of different family members when someone goes missing. To protect anonymity this is not one single person's story, but instead a composite of experiences shared with us through research into the experiences of Black missing children and adults, and through the development of this toolkit.

Mother of missing child

My son has gone missing a number of times, sometimes up to a week at a time. He's always been such a good boy, he never stayed out late or didn't come home unless he'd told us he was seeing a friend. It started when he went to secondary school - since he was in year 7, an 11-year-old little boy in his brand new uniform and his hair spick and span, he'd been asked to hold drugs for some of the older boys. And that was the start of it. Since then it's led to periods of time when we don't know where he is.

When I first reported these missing periods to police, I didn't feel believed or listened to. After I explained the circumstances, they said it was his choice and that he couldn't be treated as missing despite the fact that this was so out of character. My son can be really naïve and easily led, we've been trying to get school to help us assess whether he has learning difficulties and to me it was so clear he was being exploited by people older than him. And yet, the police didn't take these risks seriously, and weren't communicating with us or prioritising his case. At one point they didn't even tell me his

case was closed and it took me calling 999 to find someone to ask why they weren't talking to us.

It's like they just didn't care. I think I'm just seen as a Black parent kicking off. They don't care about me. I often wonder if I would be treated this way if I was White and I hate saying those things because it makes me feel like I'm just this negative parent talking about Black and White. But at the end of the day, if I can't trust the police to find my son, who can I trust? We feel like we're just going round and round in circles. One of the most confusing interactions that we've had with the social care teams is being told that he needs a positive Black male role model. My husband has been an amazing father, we're together - we just look at each other in those moments and think, 'How can they say this?'

Father of missing child

As soon as the police arrived, before they conducted their search of our house, they separated myself and my wife and interviewed me like a criminal, as if I had something to do with my child going missing. And they weren't even doing anything, like checking CCTV, following up leads, or checking on places of interest. It made me wonder if the fact we are Black has made them assume there's something wrong at home.

I don't want the police's opinion of me to affect the decision they make for my child. I would do things like tone down my conversation even though I want to scream. I have to hold my tongue because from my experience the police can make a snap decision based on how you talk to them and I don't want them to assume I'm going to be 'difficult'.

There were failings from social workers too. There was supposed to be someone following up after each missing episode, but they never did. We were begging for help. I don't think anyone came until the third time he went missing. I constantly ask myself if it's our fault he goes missing. We were being quite strict and I know my son saw his friends had a different setup at home, less rules, more freedom. I think he compares himself with his friends. We were just trying to keep him safe, and the more we tried to keep him safe the more he ran away.

Older sister of a missing sibling

When we moved from the city and a really mixed area to where we live now in a little village, it was really hard. We've both been bullied because of the colour of our skin. Older kids assumed my brother would be up for trouble, that's when he started being targeted and going missing.

It's sad to see how the media doesn't treat Black missing people the same as White missing people. It was always us and my brother's friends posting on social media asking for people to look for him, but even the local media didn't report it as a story even when he was missing for a week. The photo the police used was also really bad quality even though my parents gave them photos of him looking nice in his school uniform. It makes us all feel bad about ourselves - it's like Black people aren't seen as worthy or valuable as White people - if he was White, he wouldn't be disregarded like this.

A lot of times, I wouldn't tell the police I hadn't seen him at school. I knew the strain it had on my parents to continuously report it to the police and receive bad care in return. If it wasn't anything too serious, I would often go and try and find him on my own to make sure he was safe.

We don't talk a lot about mental health in our community, but after these experiences it is impossible not to.

I believe all our mental health has suffered - mine, my mum and dad's, and my brother's. It has destroyed our family. It doesn't feel like there's anywhere to go for help though.

► **MISSING PEOPLE**

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

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

► **LISTEN UP**

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

<https://listenupresearch.org/>

**missing
people**

Registered charity in England and Wales (1020419)
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