BLACK

&

MISSING

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

UNDERSTANDING OUR EXPERIENCES: WHY BLACK CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE GO MISSING

Reflections from research and lived experience

Black children and adults will go missing for the same, numerous reasons that all people go missing. But there may be some issues that impact them more, or in different ways, than for others.

The following quotes and experiences have been collated from research and from the lived experience of young people and families who helped to develop this toolkit. The aim is to give some insight into what might be happening for Black missing children and their families, although we of course will not have captured the very varied nature of people's individual experiences.

Expolitation

"Since he was in year 7. A little, young 11-year-old boy in his brand-new uniform was so excited to be at secondary school you know, looking spick and span and his hair all nice. And his first few weeks, he was asked to hold drugs for older boys in the school."
- Parent

"A reason why young kids might go missing might be because illegal lifestyles and that get glamourised... like selling drugs. That kind of thing."
- Young person"

"I was being groomed and sexually exploited thus, I was with the perpetrators"
- Young person

"It kind of feels like I've got my life with my child, which I'm desperately trying to keep going. And then there's this outside street life that he's got going on that I literally have no idea about, that he tries to protect me from and tries to keep me out of.

But I know that there is a life going on outside of my home that he is involved in."
- Parent

Problems at home
Research shows that difficulties at home is one of the main reasons why all children go missing.

i. Family conflict and pressure
Living in strict households and limited freedom was a reoccurring theme participants spoke about in relation to reasons for going missing

"Issues at home, needing a break - cause sometimes small things can mount up, and you know, children don't have another way to get a break if it all gets a bit much."
- Young person

"Black African parents are quite strict, and so people will rebel!"
- Young person

"May have stricter parents, they might tell you that you can't do something so you might go missing so you can do this."
- Young person

Some young people spoke specifically about the pressure of academic expectations:

"I think in terms of if someone's chosen to run away, a lot of Black families can have the kind of thing of academic pressure on their children. And that can make a child feel like their worth is equated to their academic success. So that could drive them to leave the home."
- Young person

Whilst Black young people felt home was at times a strict environment, one parent shared

that they were trying to protect their child by putting curfews in place but were instead perceived as being too strict, which in turn pushed their child further away.

"We were being quite strict. And the children that our son got involved with had a different sort of setup at home and their parents weren't strict and so he was constantly, I think comparing in his head what his friends, you know, like what their kind of like curfews were or whatever with what we were trying to do. And we were just trying to keep him safe. And the more we tried to keep him safe the more he ran away."
- Parent

ii. Feeling unsafe

Some young people also shared that feeling unsafe at home can be a reason why Black young people go missing:

"They don't feel safe at home."
    - Young person

"Scared of family members."
    - Young person

"They might be frightened of the consequences."
    - Young person

"Also fear of punishment if they've made any kinds of mistakes because it can be seen as quite normal to smack your child if you're a part of like a Black family. And that can make people want to leave their home because they're afraid of telling their family when they've made some kind of mistake. And yeah, so I guess also out of fear of judgment or like extreme punishment."
    - Young person

One professional shared that they felt this may also be linked to domestic abuse:

"Higher prevalence of domestic abuse within the household"
    - Professional

iii. Financial concerns

The pressure to earn money and support the family purse was an issue shared by participants as a potential factor pushing young people towards exploitative situations, which in turn can cause them to go missing. A form of internalised adultification featured in these responses, where young people felt a sense of responsibility to takeon adult concerns and to create a better life for their family.

"Sometimes Black homes have more poverty, they do not always have a two-parent household, and so this might lead the person to leave and make money."
    - Young person

"Wanting a better life for their family so are vulnerable"
    - Young person

"I think especially with cost of living there could be low income. That could make a child maybe feel more like a burden, they might leave the house to maybe feel like they're helping family, and maybe have less pressure of an extra person to be taking care of."
    - Young person

One parent spoke of how their child seemed to feel they needed to take on financial responsibility and support the family, despite it not being necessary. The parent was clear that this was not something they wanted their child to worry about or feel the need to take on, but found it hard to challenge the perception they had built up.

"He started asking me, this was later down the line, things like, how much does the mortgage cost and how much are these? You know, different bills and stuff. And I'm thinking you don't have to worry about any of that because I can do all that I can. I know it's challenging at the moment because I'm now on my own doing it all, but I can actually do it all. And that's nothing for you to worry about…"
    - Parent

A sense of belonging or social isolation

A lack of diversity in neighbourhoods and feeling isolated from wider society were issues Black young people and parents felt could negatively impact a sense of belonging and inclusion.

"I think maybe because a lot of Black people that like live in the country, it's probably like the first generation that have lived here… If there's a problem at home for a young Black person, they don't really have anywhere else to go. It could just be like they're family is the first to move to this country. Or say they do have family here, it might be someone's down south, up north and they don't really have anywhere else to go, but just to go missing."
    - Young person

Systemic issues in school and other education settings

While experiencing unhappiness at school is known to be something that can trigger missing episodes for all children, it was evident in this research that Black young people can experience particular and specific challenges in education and within the education system that can exacerbate the risk of them going missing.

"We were living in a very multicultural area in [area A] and we moved out into a small village and where my son went to school was in [area B] and it was very White. And that wasn't good in terms of his cultural identity. I think that my son had, and my daughter as well, who's 14, have had kind of like racial bullying and stuff. And at, right at the point when my son started to get into trouble and the exploitation we think started."
    - Parent

"I don't think that Black children are given the space to be themselves in this society, in this culture."
    - Parent

"The outcomes for Black children in school, the figures are so disproportionately skewed, and I feel that, you know, if you're feeling let down by an education system. Then the attraction of, you know, being somebody and being involved in something is very, very appealing and when you feel that life is not going well for you."
    - Parent

"They could not manage him either. He was removed off site and taught off site, so that was it for me. That was the gateway to the gangs because he's meeting older kids at the PRU [Pupil Referral Unit] he's catching on to tips and tricks. He's... starting to form behaviours of the people that are around him."

- Parent

"Increased likelihood of school exclusion, constantly being underestimated means you're never pushed or challenged so you get bored of everything around you."

- Professional

Mental health

Mental health is amongst the most common reasons why anyone can go missing, but some young people specifically identified this risk for Black children, including challenges in accessing treatment.

"Poor mental health"

- Young person

"Poor mental or physical health"

- Young person

"Lack of acknowledgement of mental health issues as well... I think that's another thing that mental health isn't always considered to be something to take care of. Or it would only be approached in a religious aspect of like the child should pray, rather than, like thinking about therapy and other kinds of support as well."

- Young person

Seeking independence

"Wanting to go for a walk alone but in a children's homes with no 'independent time'."

- Young person

"Went out on NYE, I had a curfew but it was NYE so I stayed out until the afternoon of New Year's Day, with friends."

- Young person

"Went into care but wanted to go home, so was going home. Or I kept leaving foster placements in the hope they would end the placement"

- Young person

"I think back to when my daughter was very young and realise from a very early age that she was very very adventurous and even at three years old was extremely confident. Confident to be on her own and not fully understanding the dangers/harm that the world may/could expose her too. Additionally as she was growing up she felt quite misunderstood and with my own personal trauma I was very overprotective trying to prevent her from some of my past experiences. This combination made her feel untrusted and eventually led her to rebel along with her personal fearless behaviour. This combination caused her to venture out and explore without fully understanding the consequences of her actions."

- Parent

A PERSONAL STORY

The following testimonial has been provided by one of the Lived Experience Advisors who helped to develop this toolkit. She has chosen the pseudonym AK for herself, and SK for her daughter. It is a raw, emotional testament intended to show policymakers and police officers that behind every "missing person" report is a human story of systemic failure, undiagnosed trauma, and a desperate need for cultural empathy.

When using this testimonial, please ensure that AK/SK remain anonymous.

In answering the questions, the focus is on my daughter's experience as the missing person and other parts provide insights into the circumstances that she was running away from.

In my conversations with my daughter, I have apologised to her for not knowing what she was going through on a deeper level. I did not understand it and had no knowledge of how mental health in children could present itself. When we talked about this experience in our lives, I reassured her that sharing our story was for the purpose of helping other Black families and policy makers understand what some of the difficulties may look like for a missing Black child. children and adults will have an enduring effect on people's trust in the system and response, and consequently on their sense of safety.

1. The Daughter's Reality: Searching for Sanctuary on a Night Bus

While the system saw a "disruptive" teenager, SK was a child drowning in a sea of shared trauma. At just 13 years old, she found more "family" on the top deck of the N109 night bus at 4:00 AM than she did in the cold institutions designed to protect her.

- **A "Therapeutic" Brotherhood of Pain:** SK was part of a group of 15 children who rode buses to escape "home problems". They didn't just hang out; they drank and cried together, bonded by the "valid reasons" they were outside—sexual abuse, physical violence, and neglect.
- **The Burden of the "Go-To" Person:** Even while her own mental health crumbled, SK became the informal social worker for her peers. She was the one who "clocked" that a friend was wetting the bed because his father was raping him; she was the one who protected her younger siblings from "Annie's" house because she knew Annie's father was a predator.
- **The Care System's Empty Promises:** For SK, entering care felt like being "trapped" and "belittled". The staff "logged activities" against her name for a pay check rather than offering a hand to hold. She attempted suicide while in care, was raped with no therapy and no aftercare.

Mum asked SK to describe her lowest moments and whether she felt like there was help available when she was going missing at home and in care. SK described this as follows:

"It felt like I could not talk to my mum. I was not aware about the abuse mum was going through. I blamed her for everything. I did not understand what she was going through. My view of mums was different then. I now understand. But needed to get out of that trauma first."

"White kids get diagnosed quicker when it comes to mental health. In care they said I might be bipolar. Another point they were getting me diagnosed for opposition defiance disorder. A man came to see me and questioning me, he asked me to pass him a cup a water. I said no. He said that proves my point."

"I think Social Services preys on immigrant families and most times don't even bring in translator to explain why they are tearing families apart"

"They would treat black kids like adults. For example, there is no culturally appropriate placement, and we are fed chicken nuggets daily. Because black kids know how to clean their rooms, cook and look after their bodies – we are treated like adults."

"A friend started doing drugs to keep warm on street. He was in care and kept coming back to Croydon. He got arrested. Came back. Wearing same clothes for months. He would sleep. He then started to rob people to survive. Can you imagine robbing for a jacket?" Yet he was in care.

"Mum, what did I gain from being in care? My life became worse, and I don't even have a basic education."

2. The Mother's Battle: A "Perfect Storm" of Invisible Chains

AK's perspective reveals the agonizing gap between a mother's love and the systemic barriers that paralyzed her. She admits with heartbreak that she didn't initially understand how mental health presents in children, often mistaking SK's cries for help as "stubbornness" and ended up with poor decisions made in desperation. With no place to go for help.

Trapped by Poverty and Abuse: In 2016, AK's family was moved to an "inhabitable" home in Peckham infested with mice that ate their meagre food supply. For 18 months, she fought the council over gas leaks and a leaking roof while trying to feed eight people on a microscopic budget.

The Shackle of Domestic Silence: AK was living in a "battleground" where her husband used financial abuse—hiding bills and forging signatures—to keep her compliant. She was "walking on eggshells" to keep the peace, unaware that SK was witnessing the trauma and blaming her for it.

Systemic Slander: When AK finally fled for her life in 2020, the system turned its scrutiny on her parenting. She recalls the sting of the police factually lying to Social Services, claiming they had arrested her and her child—a "slander" that shattered her trust in authority.

3. The Gap: Adultification and the "Missing" Priority

The most harrowing revelation in this story is the stark difference in how Black children are treated compared to their white peers.

Labels Instead of Love: While white children are often diagnosed with mental health conditions, Black children like SK are labelled with "Opposition Defiance Disorder" (ODD).

The Erasure of Vulnerability: Because Black children often know how to cook, clean, and look after their bodies, the system "adultifies" them. They are treated as mini adults who can handle the street, rather than children in need of a parent and a decent place to call home.

The Police Bias: SK recalls being stopped by police while missing in Croydon; because her home was in East London and "too far" to drive, they simply let her go. Her white friend, in the same situation, was driven safely home. To the police, a missing Black child is often seen as a participant in "criminal activities" like county lines rather than a victim.

A Call for Radical Reform

Many families do not have the strength or wisdom to navigate the challenges within their communities. AK and SK have worked tirelessly to heal their lives, but the scars remain. SK is now a young girl living with depression, severe anxiety and the weight of a stolen education. Their message to policymakers is clear:

1. **Stop Adultifying Black Children:** Recognize neurodiversity and trauma over "bad behavior".
2. **Fund Families, Not Placements:** The massive funding used to cycle children through cold placements should be used to support families in staying together safely. Black parents love their children.
3. **Humanize the Process:** Bring in translators for immigrant families and ensure police prioritize missing Black youth with the same urgency as their white peers.

► 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

LISTEN UP