

“MY WORLD WAS FALLING APART”

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

A lifeline when someone disappears

**missing
people**

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

Information sheet 1: Key findings

Almost 400 adults are reported missing in the UK each day, however very little is known about why adults go missing, how and why they come to harm while missing, and the impact being missing has on their life when they return. There is a substantial gap in understanding of the wider nature and scale of harm experienced while adults are missing.

This research aims to:

1. Identify why adults go missing and how this links to harm or threats of harm
2. Identify the nature and scale of harm being experienced by adults while

they are missing and the impact of this harm after return

3. Identify how Missing People, the police and other agencies need to respond to missing adults to prevent and reduce harm.

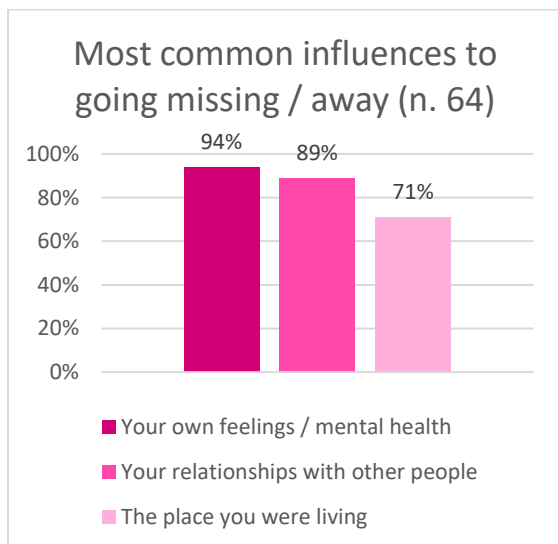
A mixed methods approach has been used in this research. This included conducted a literature review, analysing 425 records held by the Missing People charity, analysing 125 police force records, and original research conducted with 64 adults who have been missing.

To read the full report please [click here](#).

Key findings

The most common reasons adults go missing are linked to mental health, suicide, and relationships with other people

Adults go missing in varied and complex situations, often experiencing intersecting issues and challenges. The most commonly identified influences on going missing identified in this research are linked to mental health, suicidal plans and thoughts and missing people's relationships with other people. There are also strong links with their living situation, concerns around personal safety, and financial worries.



It is crucial that those responding to missing take each individual's circumstances into account when assessing risk and determining steps to be taken in response to their missing episode.

Mental health was the most commonly identified risk or vulnerability being experienced by missing adults in Missing People and police records.

Over 3 in 4 adults disclosed experiencing harm while missing

"I was alone and feeling very suicidal each time I went missing, so I was just unsafe being on my own!"

77% of adults completing the survey conducted for this research experienced harm while away (49 of 64). This compares to 10% in National Crime Agency statistics on missing.

In the survey 40% of missing adults disclosed trying to take their own life while away, and nearly 60% disclosed experiencing some other form of harm, including being threatened, sexually assaulted or experiencing physical violence while away.

There was clear evidence of harm related to crime, with 1 in 3 disclosing that they had experienced an unwelcome sexual approach or were assaulted sexually while missing, and



1 in 4

experienced physical violence or force



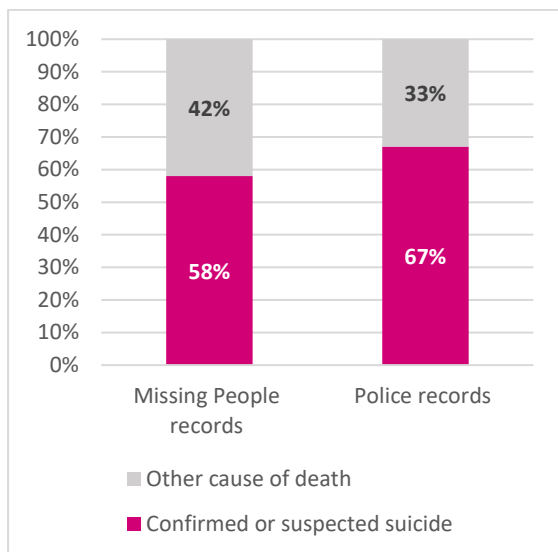
1 in 3

experienced an unwelcome sexual approach or were assaulted sexually

“I was [experiencing] very low moods and wanted to end it and I felt like there wasn’t enough support in place to be able to pick myself up.”

nearly 1 in 4 experiencing physical violence or force.

In case records where the person sadly died, the most common cause of death was confirmed or suspected suicide. This was the case in 58% (52 of 89) of Missing People records and 67% (12 of 18) of police records reviewed for this research where the person died while missing.



Going missing can exacerbate risk: 66% of returned missing adults disclosed that being missing had impacted their mental health

Nearly 2/3rds (40 of 61) of adults completing the survey for this research disclosed that

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being missing had impacted their mental health. This was linked to finding it difficult to return to ‘normal’ life, the negative impact on them of others knowing that they had been missing and related information about them, and negative impacts due to what they had experienced while missing.

Over half (57%; 34 of 60) said that being missing had a negative impact on their relationships with their family and their own sense of wellbeing.

“Adjusting back to normal life was difficult and I found it more difficult to interact with peers as I had had negative and dark experiences they hadn’t and probably wouldn’t understand.”

Most people return to the place they went missing from, meaning that they may be returning somewhere they were unsafe or unhappy, where they were experiencing relationship or financial problems, or even abuse and harm.

Returning from missing does not resolve the problems being experienced before going missing and can frequently make those things worse.

The majority of missing adults did not try to access support or help while away

65% (41 of 63) of missing adults did not try to access support or help while away. The high proportion of adults who experience harm while away shows that support is vital both during the missing episode and, perhaps even more importantly, at the point of return. The research findings suggest most adults are not getting the support they need.

Those supporting missing adults, including charities like Missing People, must ensure that their services are reaching those at need of support while away and on return.

Going missing is rarely an isolated incident

This research clearly shows that missing is not an event that should be seen in isolation. Adults who go missing are often experiencing multiple challenges and pressures that ultimately influence them going missing, as well as risks and vulnerabilities that may exacerbate their risk of coming to harm while away. Missing can often be a symptom of things not going quite right for people and covers a wide range of individual situations and experiences.

The majority of adults who go missing then experience harm while away, including harm that could be termed as being criminal harm. The most common harm experienced while away is related to suicide and self-harm, followed by sexual, physical harm, and being threatened while missing. And while the majority of adults come to harm, very few access help or support while away.

When adults return from being missing, they often return to situations they were trying to get away from in the first place, including situations in which they were unsafe or unhappy. Being missing can exacerbate risks present before going missing, with adults disclosing that being missing has a negative impact on many different aspects of their lives.

“Made mental health 10 [times] worse this time and physical pain”

There is an overarching need for support to be available to adults 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 experience. While many agencies have a role to play in reducing this harm, the police as the primary agency in responding to adults going missing have a central responsibility to safeguard adults from harm linked to missing.¹

¹ For more information about what the police do when someone is reported missing, please see Missing People’s website:

<https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/get-help/help-services/how-police-search>

Recommendations

Before missing / prevention

This research shows that people go missing in a myriad of different situations, experiencing a wide range of risks and vulnerabilities. And while it can be difficult to identify when someone is at risk of going missing, some groups have been identified as being at increased risk. This particularly includes people experiencing mental health issues, who may have come into contact with mental health professionals.

- Mental health professionals should be equipped with protocols to use when supporting someone who may be at risk of going missing. With similar aims to the Philomena Protocol and the Herbert Protocol, this should include talking to people about the risks of going missing, what would happen if they do go missing, where they might go if they do go missing, and what support they might need to prevent them from going missing.²
- Missing People should review how the charity's services are delivered and marketed, to ensure they are meeting the needs of adults who are thinking about going missing, especially adults with mental health issues

² For more information about both the Herbert and Philomena Protocols, please see Missing People's website: <https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/for-professionals/services-for-professionals/welcome-to-the-national-missing-persons-framework-toolkit-for-professionals-in-scotland/prevent-introduce-preventative-measures-to-reduce-the-number-of-missing-persons-episodes/the-herbert-protocol-purple-alert-and-the-philomena-protocol>

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Risk assessments

The identification of risk for each missing episode is critical in determining the steps to be taken when someone is reported missing. Risk assessment processes should enable consideration to be made of each individual's circumstances as well as standard questions around risk, recognising the complex nature of missing episodes. This research has found that most missing adults are at risk while missing, from mental health, to risks around suicide, to being a victim of assault or other crime. The police should try to understand as fully as possible the risks each adult faces when they are missing through detailed, effective risk assessment processes. They should therefore include:

- Using professional curiosity when assessing risk, including exploring risks around diagnosed and undiagnosed mental health, suicide, previous missing episodes, and previous harm experienced³
- Seeking information from other professionals, relatives and friends, particularly where the reporting person is not able to share a full picture of risk. This is in line with existing College of Policing Authorised Professional Practice guidance.⁴

³ The College of Policing's Curiosity guidelines: <https://www.college.police.uk/guidance/vulnerability-related-risks/curiosity>

⁴ College of Policing Authorised Professional Practice, Missing Persons: <https://www.app.college.police.uk/app-content/major-investigation-and-public-protection/missing-persons/>

During missing

An accurate identification of risk is crucial in determining what happens when someone is reported missing, meaning that the police can appropriately allocate resourcing based on each individual missing incident. Missing adults may need additional support while missing, particularly where they have gone missing in high-risk situations. Those offering this type of support should ensure that it is reaching missing adults and that it is meeting their needs:

- Missing People should review their support offer to missing adults, including rolling out the provision of Suicide Risk TextSafe® across the country
- Police forces should maximise the use of TextSafe® and Suicide Risk TextSafe® to ensure missing adults are aware of Missing People's confidential, anonymous, free to access support

Return

This research has found that very few adults will seek help while missing. It also shows that rates of disclosures of harm are higher when disclosed directly from adults who have been missing than were made on return to the police in the records reviewed for this research. Rates of harm experienced were significantly higher than is currently evidenced in national statistics on missing.

While this research did not examine the effectiveness of police Safe & Well checks / prevention interviews, they are a key opportunity to identify harm suffered and any support needed for returned missing adults. To encourage disclosures from returned adults, Safe & Well checks should be delivered in a way that enables returned missing adults to share why they went missing, what happened while away, and what help they need to prevent them going missing again.⁵ The police should be able to direct them to further support if needed.

Prevention interview / Safe & Well check delivery should include:

- Ensuring that returned missing adults are given a safe and supportive space and enough time to talk about their missing episode, including any harm they may have come to while missing
- Having access to referral routes for further support for issues including mental health, personal safety and financial support. This could include details of charities like Missing People and Citizens Advice Bureau, and established referral routes to local support services and to community mental health teams

⁵ This is in line with the College of Policing's Curiosity guidelines:

<https://www.college.police.uk/guidance/vulnerability-related-risks/curiosity>

- Local authorities and Health and Wellbeing Boards should consider piloting return discussions for returned missing adults. These could be delivered by independent providers, giving adults an opportunity to disclose more about their experiences and access support from a non-police partner

The evidence in this report suggests that harm is often not disclosed in safe and well checks and is much more common than the figures in current national statistics. This suggests that people are left dealing with experiences of harm including suicide attempts, abuse, assaults and worsening mental health without support.

The complexity of people's experiences, both in what drove them to go missing and in what they experienced while they were away, show that there is not a single existing pathway into support for this group: the support needed will hugely vary depending on the individual and the police will not be the right agency to support many returned people, including those with financial issues and mental health issues. While police have a central role to play when someone returns from being missing, responding to missing adults should be understood to be a multi-agency responsibility. All areas should have a local protocol in place to outline how local agencies will work together to safeguard and support missing and returned people:

- Local authorities and multi-agency partners in England, including the police and the NHS, should review

their responses to missing adults in light of the 2020 'multi-agency response for adults missing from health and care settings: A national framework for England'⁶

- Local authorities and multi-agency partners in Scotland should review their responses to missing adults in light of the 2017 National Missing Persons Framework for Scotland⁷
- Missing People should work with partners in Wales to develop a multi-agency framework outlining how local agencies will work together to safeguard and support missing and returned adults, similar to that developed in England

⁶ Home Office & Missing People, *The multi-agency response for adults missing from health and social care settings: A national framework for England*, October 2020, https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/The_multi-agency_response_for_adults_missing_from_health_and_care_settings_A_national_framework_for_England_Web_Oct_2020.pdf.

⁷ National Missing Persons Framework for Scotland, May 2017: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/national-missing-persons-framework-scotland/>