

“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 3: Fatal outcome cases

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](#).

“My world was falling apart”: the nature and scale of harm experienced by missing adults, 2022

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Case study

- Darren* was reported missing after his friends had been unable to contact him for a few days. There was no known ‘trigger’ for the missing episode, but he was experiencing a number of vulnerabilities: he had been suffering from poor mental health and had attempted to take his own life in the past.
- He had gone missing without taking anything with him; leaving his phone, money and keys at home. When the police began looking for him, they found some evidence that he had gone with the intention of taking his own life, and he was ultimately found having done so.

Fatal outcome cases

While in the majority of missing person cases in the UK the person does return or is found, in a small minority of cases (less than 1%) the person is sadly found to have died while they have been missing.¹ Recent NCA statistics show that the number of fatal outcomes has been increasing year on year since 2016-17. In 2019-20, there were 955 fatal outcomes in the UK, compared to 711 in 2016-17: a 34% increase. The vast majority (97%) of these cases relate to missing adults: 926 missing adult episodes resulted in a fatal outcome in 2019-20.

In our research, 107 cases were reviewed where the person had sadly died while they were missing:

- 89 of these records were those held by Missing People
- 18 of these records were Staffordshire Police force records

Suicide

In both Missing People and Staffordshire Police records, suicide was the most common cause of death in cases where there was a fatal outcome.

The most common cause of death in the records, either known, or suspected given the circumstances, was death by suicide.

For Missing People records, over half of the cases in which someone died were confirmed or suspected death by suicide (52 of 89; 58%). Regarding the police records where the person had died: in 2/3rds of cases the death was confirmed or suspected to be suicide (12 of 18; 67%).

These findings confirm previous research which has found that in missing cases where the cause of death is known the most common cause is suicide.

Learning from Fatal Disappearances found that in 56 of the 186 cases they examined the missing person had taken their own life.²

¹ A fatal outcome happens in much less than 1% of cases: in 2019-20 there were 955 fatal outcomes and over 350,000 missing incidents in the UK, meaning around 0.3% of cases result in a fatality.

² Newiss, G. (2011) *Learning from Fatal Disappearances*, Missing People.

Unknown cause of death

In nearly 40% of Missing People records the cause of death was unknown (34 of 89; 38%). For the majority of these cases, this was due to the records not containing information beyond the fact that the person had died. For example, where the charity is told by the police that there has been a fatal outcome but not given any details beyond that.

In many of these cases, the person went missing in situations that suggest they may have died due to their existing poor health, including ill-health linked to age.

For example, some of the records provide details of elderly people with existing serious health conditions being reported missing and later being found to have died. These records do not specify how they died, but the circumstances do suggest it is linked to existing vulnerabilities.

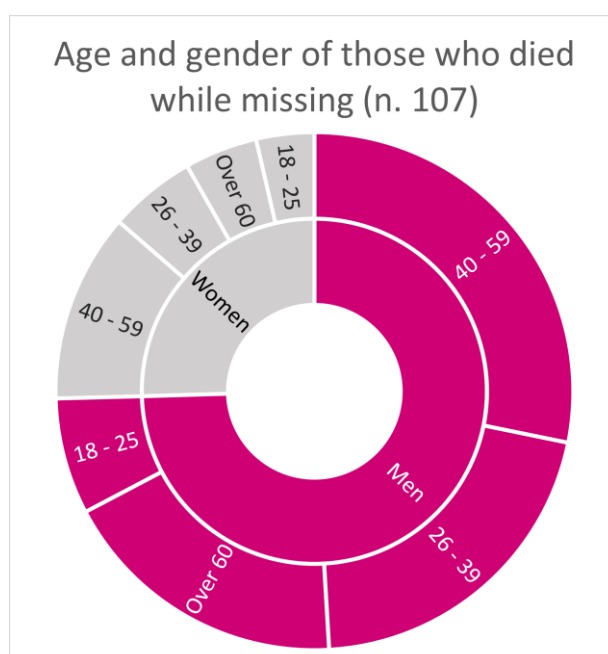
In other cases, the circumstances of their missing episode do suggest that the person went missing with thoughts of suicide, but the level of information in the records about what happened while they were missing do not enable that conclusion to be reached with any level of confidence.

In a smaller number of cases, the person has been reported missing in situations that suggest an accident has happened. For these cases, there are examples where the person had no mental health concerns, had holidays booked, and had been reported missing because they had not returned from doing something they would typically spend time doing. These have been coded as 'unknown cause' in this research because the level of detail in the records is too low and any coding would be making assumptions.

In a small number of Police records (3 cases) the cause of death was unknown.

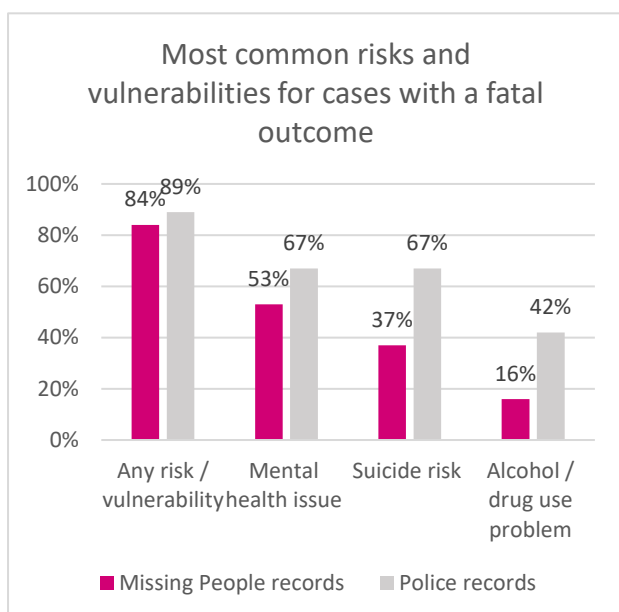
Other causes

In a very small number of Missing People cases the death was linked to crime, including murder (2 cases), or was confirmed to be due to an accident (1 case). In Police records, in 2 cases the death was accidental and in 1 case the death was due to natural causes.



Risks and vulnerabilities being experienced by people who died while missing

In the majority of the cases in which someone died while missing, the person was known or suspected to be experiencing at least one risk or vulnerability. The most commonly identified risks or vulnerabilities being experienced were:



The majority of people were experiencing more than one risk or vulnerability: 78% of police records showed evidence of multiple risks, as did over half of Missing People records. As might be expected given the fact that the most common cause of death was linked to suicide, the most prevalent risk factors being experienced by adults who then died while away were linked to mental health and suicide.

In reviewing the records, it appears that the risks being experienced by missing adults was recognised in the risk assessment processes. In the majority of these cases the missing incident was graded as high risk by the police:

- In Missing People records, 78% of fatal outcome cases had been graded as high risk (71 of 89) and 16% as medium risk (14 of 89). Only 4 cases were assessed as being low risk.
- In Police records, 61% (11 of 18) were graded at high risk at the point of reporting, and the rest were graded as medium risk (7 of 18). Of those 7, 3 were re-graded during the missing episode to high risk, meaning that ultimately 78% of fatal outcome cases were assessed as high risk.

This is a much higher proportion of cases being graded as high risk than is seen more generally in missing person reports. In England & Wales in 2019-20, only 12% of all incidents were determined to be high risk, a much smaller proportion than in these cases where there was a fatal outcome.

In many of the cases reviewed, it was clear from what was reported to the police that the person had gone missing in situations where their life was potentially at risk. Many had gone away in circumstances that clearly indicated risks of suicide. This included leaving a note, telling someone that they wanted to die, or going missing in mental health crisis having attempted suicide in the past.

However, while a high proportion of cases were assessed as high risk, 22% of cases were not. Where someone dies while missing and their case was not assessed as high risk, police forces should review the risk assessment decision making and circumstances of that case carefully to determine whether there is something that they can do to improve the risk assessment process and to better identify cases where there may be risk of death.

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.³
- 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

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 experienced⁴
- 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.⁵

³³ 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>

⁴ The College of Policing's Curiosity guidelines: <https://www.college.police.uk/guidance/vulnerability-related-risks/curiosity>

⁵ College of Policing Authorised Professional Practice, Missing Persons: <https://www.app.college.police.uk/app-content/major-investigation-and-public-protection/missing-persons/>

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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.⁶ 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

⁶ This is in line with the College of Policing's Curiosity guidelines:

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

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- 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’⁷

- 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 Scotland⁸
- 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

⁷ 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.

⁸ National Missing Persons Framework for Scotland, May 2017: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/national-missing-persons-framework-scotland/>