"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

Information sheet 4: Cases in which the person is still missing

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.

Cases in which the person is still missing

In the majority of missing person cases the episode is resolved relatively quickly, with 97% of adults being found within a week. However, in a small proportion of cases the missing person is not found and does not return for a longer period of time. At the end of March 2019-20 there were 4,543 'long-term' (missing for over a year) missing individuals in England & Wales, 773 in Scotland, and 57 in Northern Ireland.[1] The majority of these cases relate to adults: 2,839 in England & Wales and 507 in Scotland.[2]

For this research 137 of Missing People's 'still missing' cases were analysed. At the time of data export 70% (96) of those were cases where the person had been missing for at least 12 months. The remaining 30% (41) were cases where the person had been missing between 8 and 12 months. In 4 cases the person had been missing for over 2 years, with the longest missing episode being nearly 7 years.

In these long-term episodes some situations appear to be more prevalent than in those cases in which the person was found / returned or where they died.

Such circumstances include cases in which the person has arrived in the UK from abroad and has either been reported missing very quickly after arriving or linked to the processes around claiming asylum. In some of these cases there are concerns around trafficking and exploitation, and in some situations the person was thought to be experiencing concern around the asylum process itself.

Case study

Amal* was reported missing after he left his supported accommodation without telling anyone where he was going. He had just found out that his asylum application had failed. There were concerns that he may have been being exploited and working in unsafe conditions. At the time of writing he has been missing for over a year.

In other cases the circumstances do suggest that the person has died, but a body has not been found and they have not been missing for long enough to make a presumption of death declaration.[3]

Some situations show that the family or someone else have not heard from the missing person for a period of time, have reported them missing due to this, but have very little information about their specific circumstances and what may have resulted in them going missing.

Homelessness was a factor in some of these cases, normally in relation to the reporting person being concerned that the person was missing and rough sleeping. In a few cases the person had gone missing after becoming homeless.

---

[1] The NCA definition of long-term missing is: "These are those individuals reported missing prior to the current reporting year and who are still missing on the last day of the reporting year, e.g. reporting year 2019/20 includes all individuals missing prior to 1st April 2019 who are still missing on 31st March 2020."

[2] The age breakdown is not available in Northern Ireland.
[3] For more information about this please visit Missing People's website: https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/get-help/help-services/practical-help/presumption-of-death

In a small number of cases there are concerns around abuse or abduction, but this is not common in the cases reviewed.

Some circumstances suggest that the person has left 'intentionally', has not told their family or friends where they are going, and does not want contact from them.
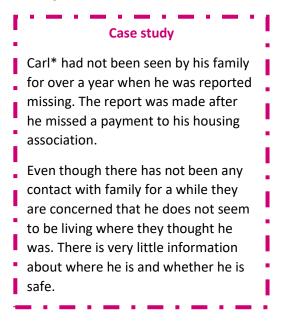
Case study

Hannah* was suffering from depression and was struggling to find a job. She was resistant to going to the doctors and was not getting any support from elsewhere.

She phoned her friend to tell her 'not to worry' and has not been seen since. There is little information about where she might have gone, and the case remains open.

In many of these cases there is very little known about the missing person or their circumstances and there is very little for the police to go on in terms of how and where to find them. There is also very little information about the risks and vulnerabilities they may be experiencing that might have resulted in them being missing, beyond the top line information contained in the missing report.

For example, for some of the cases in which the person went missing after arriving in the UK, there may be concerns about exploitation because of the circumstances of their arrival, but very little information about their individual risks and vulnerabilities.

However, there are some cases in which the person has gone missing in very similar situations to those seen in cases in which the person is found or returns, or in cases where they sadly die. But sadly these cases have not

been resolved and the person remains missing.

Case study

Carl* had not been seen by his family for over a year when he was reported missing. The report was made after he missed a payment to his housing association.

Even though there has not been any contact with family for a while they are concerned that he does not seem to be living where they thought he was. There is very little information about where he is and whether he is safe.

In almost 3/4s of the cases where the person is still missing, they were known or suspected to have been experiencing or had experienced some kind of risk or vulnerability (74%, 101 of 137 cases). The prevalence of risks and vulnerabilities is lower in Missing People's records for those people who are still missing (as seen in the table below), however this is likely in part due to the limited information that is known or shared about some people who are long-term missing.

Risks and vulnerabilities in cases where the missing person is still missing	
Mental health issue	31% (43 of 137)
Homelessness	13% (18 of 137)
Left without adequate provisions (e.g. phone or money)	12% (17 of 137)
Suicide risk	10% (13 of 137)
Abuse – history of	8% (11 of 137)

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.[4]

- 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 experienced[5]

- 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.[6]

---

[44] 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

[5] The College of Policing's Curiosity guidelines: https://www.college.police.uk/guidance/vulnerability-related-risks/curiosity

[6] 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.[7] 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

---

[7] 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'[8]

- 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 Scotland[9]

- 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

---

[88] 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.

[9] National Missing Persons Framework for Scotland, May 2017: https://www.gov.scot/publications/national-missing-persons-framework-scotland/