

“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 5: Why do adults go 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](#).

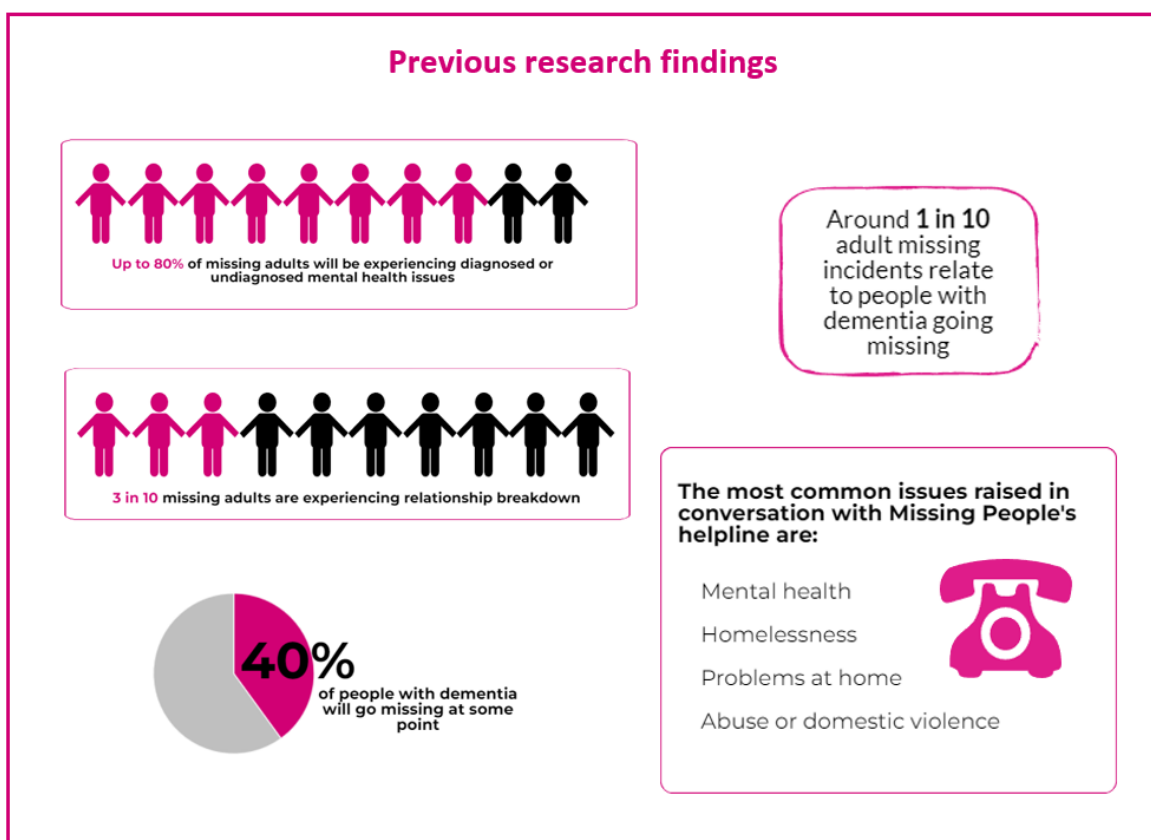
“My world was falling apart”: the nature and scale of harm experienced by missing adults, 2022
Information sheet 5: Why do adults go missing?
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Why do adults go missing?

The reasons why adults go missing are varied and complex. Previous research has shown links with mental health, dementia and relationship breakdown, as well as substance misuse and financial issues.¹ Experiencing these things can mean that adults are at risk of harm before going missing, and the challenges they face mean they may be at greater risk of harm while they are actually missing.

In understanding why adults go missing, it is also important to recognise more broadly the risks and vulnerabilities being experienced by people who have gone missing.²

The information known or provided to the police when reporting someone missing will inform the response to that missing episode, including the risk assessment level assigned to the missing episode and the steps taken in



¹ For general information please see Missing People's website: <https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/for-professionals/information-and-policy/information-and-research/key-information>. For previous research please see, for example: Bantry White, E., & Montgomery, P., Dementia, walking outdoors and getting lost: incidence, risk factors and consequences from dementia-related police missing-person reports, 2015; Bonny, E., Almond, L., & Woolnough, P., Adult missing persons: can an investigative framework be generated using behavioural themes? 2016; Eales, N., Risky business? A study exploring the relationship between harm and risk indicators in missing adult incidents, University of Portsmouth, 2016.

² By risks and vulnerabilities, we broadly mean something about an individuals' personal circumstances or life circumstances that may increase their exposure to harm. In terms of personal circumstances, this would include factors linked to age, disability, illness, and mental health, and life circumstances might include socio-economic factors, and living conditions.

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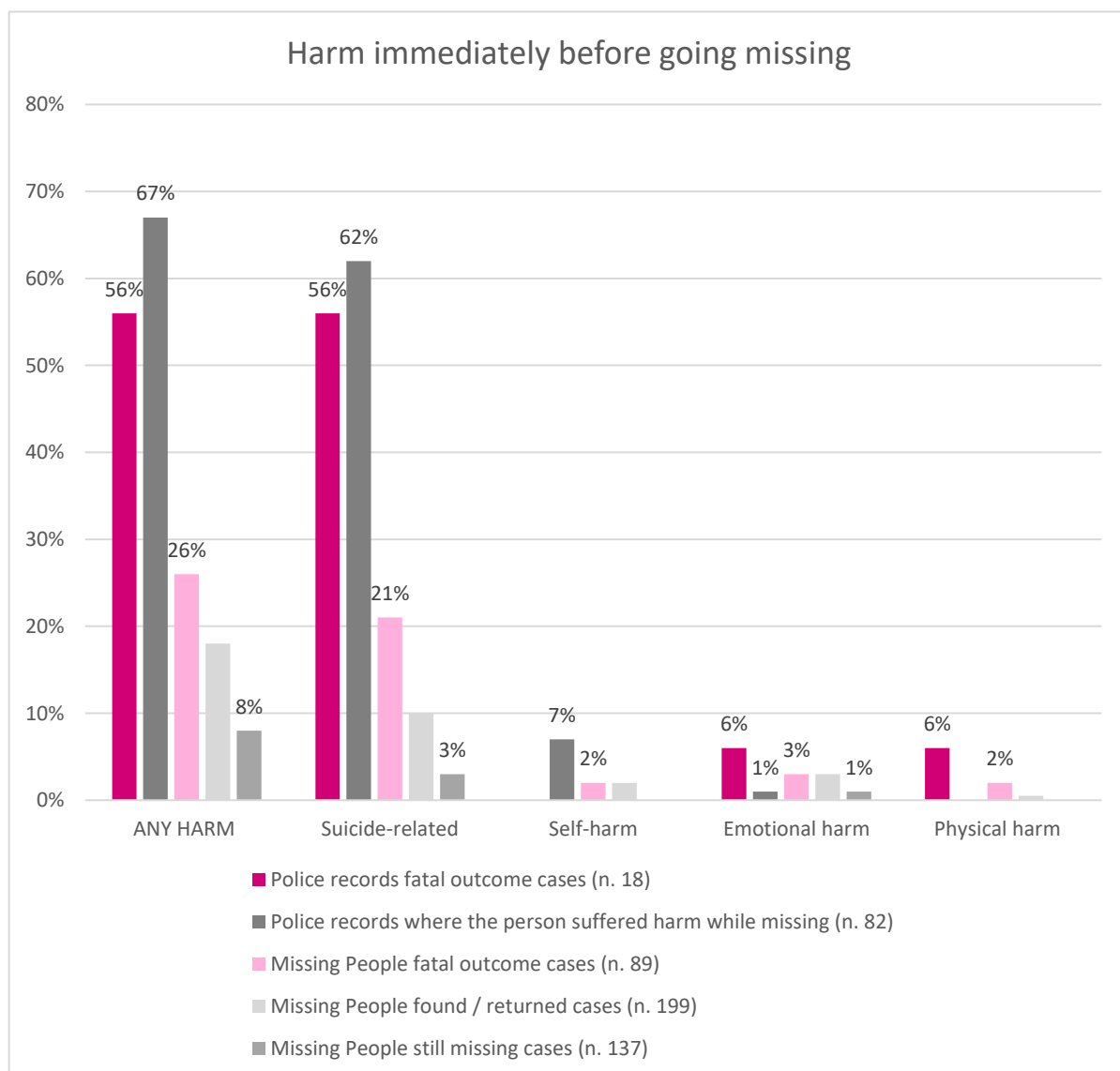
response, including the level of resource assigned to searching for the person.

The below chart shows the prevalence of harms identified in the records reviewed for this research as happening immediately before someone went missing. This includes where there was a specific trigger to someone going away. Again, the most commonly identified harms were linked to suicide attempts, thoughts or plans. In many of these cases the missing person had expressed thoughts or intentions of taking their own life, and then subsequently they were reported missing.

There were other examples where the person was known to be suicidal or had attempted to

take their own life in the days or hours before going missing.

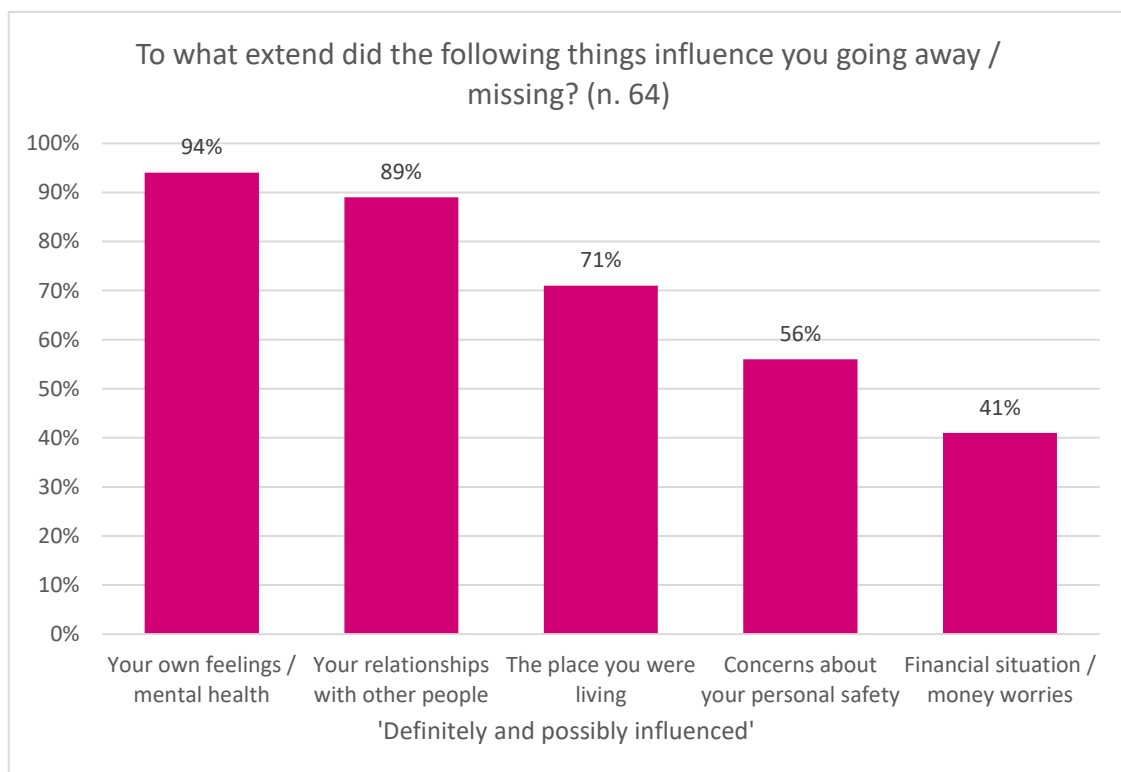
It is clear from these records that missing adults will often have experienced some kind of harm in their past or immediately before going missing. When missing reports are made, it is crucial that questions are asked about any previous harm the missing person may have experienced, including suicidal thoughts and any mental health concerns the reporting person may have. It is critical that the police take this information into consideration in making risk assessment decisions and that the response to missing adults take account of the individual circumstances surrounding that person.



Why do adults go missing? Survey with missing adults

In addition to reviewing records, reasons for going missing were explored through a survey with adults who had been missing. Sixty-four adults completed the survey. The range, complexity and intersectionality of factors influencing adults in going missing / away was clear in the survey responses, shown in the chart below.

In the majority of cases, it was a combination of factors that influenced people to leave: 7% (4) of people cited all five as definite influences on their decision to leave; 16% (10) identified four; a quarter (16) cited three factors and a further quarter (16) cited two factors. Only 8% (5) of people selected only one of the factors as influencing their decision to leave.



Broadly these influences and reasons can be broken down into three broad areas:

1. Mental health and suicide
2. Relationships and living situation
3. Finances and money concerns

Feeling suicidal and mental health issues are the most common reasons for adults to go missing

94% of missing adults were influenced to leave due to their own feelings / mental health (60 of 64)

The most common influence for going missing provided by those completing the survey was their own feelings / mental health: 94% (60 of 64) of those completing the survey reported that their own feelings / mental health had definitely or possibly influenced their decision to leave.

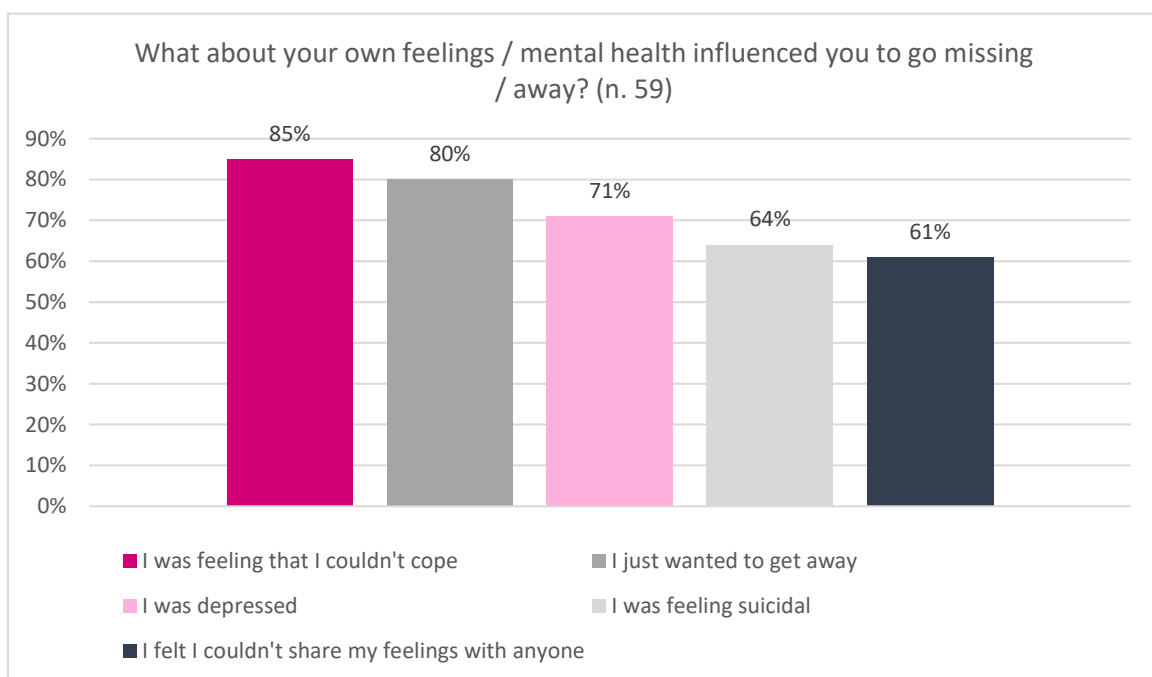
Adults whose own feelings / mental health influenced their decision to go were asked whether they were experiencing a list of different things at that time. The most common influences are shown in the chart below.

While respondents detailed specific mental health aspects, including depression and feeling suicidal, the most common influences were associated with feelings of not being able to cope and wanting to get away.

“I felt like I was going to lose everything, like my world was falling apart, like I was stuck in the same old cycle.”

Some respondents gave detail about other feelings that influenced their decision to leave. These responses included fear for their personal situation, detail about specific mental health conditions, and feeling like going away was the only way to cope with their situation.

Some of these responses detail multiple and complex situations influencing the person going away, and the strength of feeling is clear in some open text comments.



- *“Psychosis, forced to stop my mental health medication, delusions, hallucinations, paranoia, feeling like home was suffocating, feeling my abusive support workers were going to kill me.”*
- *“Felt like voices were instructing me to do things.”*
- *“Huge pressure and abuse from [boyfriend] made me give up and do whatever he wanted.”*

Some people specifically mentioned their treatment from professionals or others as being a key influence in them leaving. This included not being able to access help, feeling as though professionals did not care about them, and being concerned about steps that may be taken if they tried to access help.

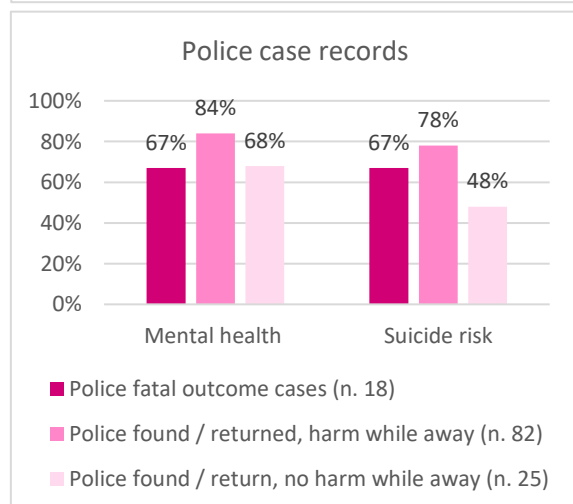
- *“I was [experiencing] very low moods and wanted to end it and I felt like there wasn’t enough support in place to be able to pick myself up.”*
- *“Felt the hospital didn’t help, they weren’t bothered about my feelings.”*
- *“No support.”*
- *“At certain points I was also worried about safeguarding procedures mental health professionals had instigated to try to keep me safe following disclosures, although it was causing more harm than good and was a massive trigger and stressor.”*

Some responses refer to ‘push factors’; something or multiple things that make people want to leave the situation they are in. Others referred to feeling safer being missing than they did in the situation they were in,

including feeling a real need to get away from their life or situation.

- *“Feeling like a burden so wanting to disappear and not bother anyone.”*
- *“The thing I needed most in the world was to be left alone, and they didn’t get it. So I left.”*
- *“I just knew I had to get away. The only time I felt safe or OK was when I was missing.”*
- *“Just wanted a new life.”*

Mental health also emerged as a key theme in the analysis of Missing People’s and the police records, where it was the most commonly identified risk or vulnerability:



The prevalence of evidence of known or suspected risks around mental health and suicide are stark in all types of cases. While the records provide less detail about what these adults were experiencing, it is clear that there are very strong links between mental health and going missing. In some records specific mental health conditions were referenced in the record: this included depression, anxiety, and conditions such as bipolar and schizophrenia. There was some evidence in records that individuals were being treated for mental health conditions, including references to medication, support workers and GP appointments. In other cases the references to mental health were less specific, with people reporting that their missing person was more generally experiencing 'poor mental health' or that they had been 'mentally unwell' when they were reported missing.

In many of these cases there was a clear risk to the person's health or life when they went missing, particularly in those cases where the person went missing while feeling suicidal: 59% of all adults responding to the survey for this research (39 of 64).

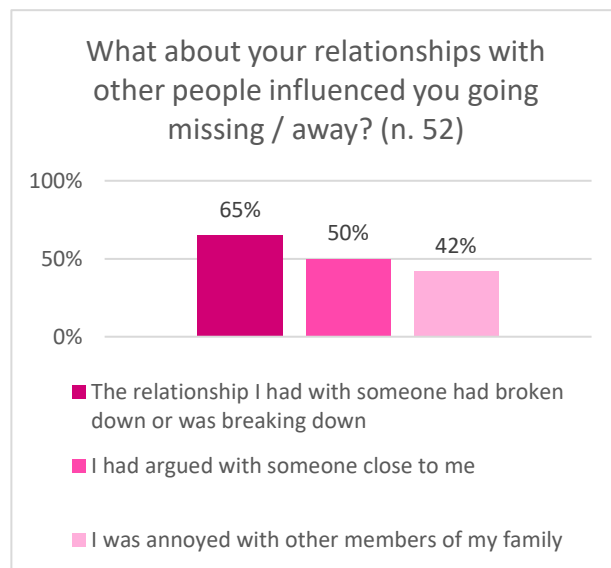
In NCA statistics mental health is the most commonly identified reason for adults going missing, but at a lower rate than disclosed in this survey: where a reason for missing was disclosed, in 25.5% of cases the reason was due to mental health.³ In a further 12.7% of cases the reason was linked to depression or anxiety, and in 5.9% of cases the reason was a suicide attempt. As stated above, the NCA statistics are considered to be under-estimates due to limitations linked to disclosures to police and limitations around

recording quality. Previous research has found that up to 80% of missing adults have a mental health issue when they go missing.⁴

Abuse, conflict and breakdown in relationships, and problems at home were common reasons for people to go missing

89% of missing adults said that their relationships with other people influenced their decision to go missing (52 of 64)

For those responding to the survey for this research, the following things were being experienced most commonly:



The most common influences in terms of relationships relate to some form of relationship breakdown, whether that was the

³ National Crime Agency's UK Missing Persons Unit, Missing Persons Data Report 2019-20. Please note however that a specific reason for going missing was only identified in 79,389 missing reports in 2019-20. The 25.5% is based on the 38,949 adult incidents where a reason was identified for adults going missing.

⁴ 'Key statistics and figures,' Missing People: <https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/for-professionals/information-and-policy/information-and-research/key-information>.

end of a relationship or a specific argument or annoyance.

Some respondents provided some detail about what they had experienced or were experiencing which influenced their decision to leave. Some of these responses refer to harm they have experienced in the past, including physical and mental abuse when they were a child, sexual assault and violence from partners.

- *“Abusive, controlling & sometimes violent relationship”*
- *“Abuse, trying to rebuild a relationship with my family after foster care.”*
- *“The longer I was facing the abuse, the worse I felt mentally, so was feeling increasingly unsafe due to my own thoughts and actions.”*
- *“Life was just going wrong. I didn’t want to talk to people, I just wanted to get as far from people as possible.”*

Considerations around relationships were less prevalent in Missing People and police records than in responses to the survey. This may be reflective of the types of information more likely to be shared in the reporting process, or it may be the case that less people in the sample of cases were experiencing issues related to their relationships. It could also be the case that this was not known to the reporting person so was not communicated to the police or to Missing People.

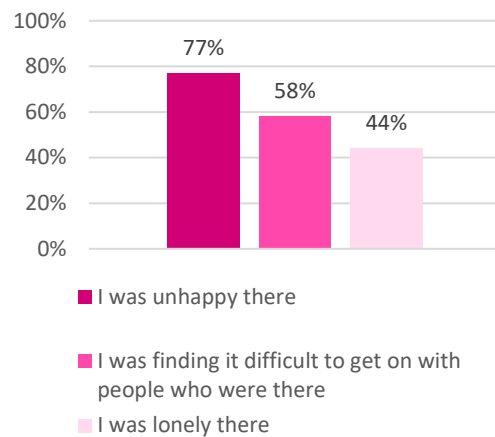
Relationship breakdown was identified in 9% of Missing People cases where the person died while they were missing and in only 5% of cases where the person returned. It was

identified in 1 in 3 Police cases where the person returned safe and well. Domestic violence was identified in a small number of

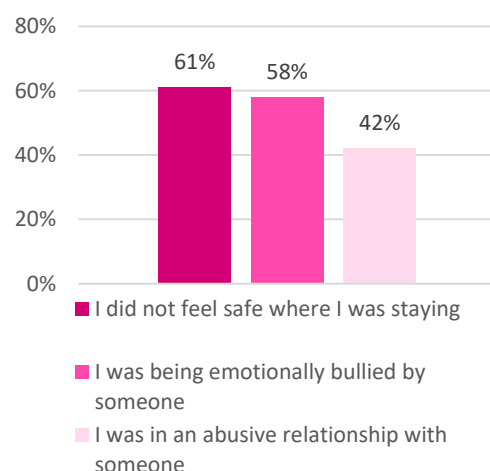
71% of missing adults said that where they were living influenced their decision to go (43 of 64)

52% said that concerns about their personal safety influenced their decision to go (33 of 64)

What about where you were living influenced you going missing / away? (n. 43)



What about your personal safety influenced you going missing / away? (n. 33)



cases.

When asking people what other concerns about their own personal safety they had at the time they went missing, responses spoke of concerns both related to other people and about their own actions or responses to what they were experiencing.

Some spoke of the behaviour or actions of people feeling as though they might push them to breaking point or act in a way they did not want to:

- *“I was concerned that my carer would push me to my breaking point causing me to want to harm myself when I really didn’t want to do that.”*
- *“I feared that if I didn’t move I’d end up hurting [someone].”*

Others spoke of feeling unsafe due to other’s actions or behaviours, including suffering abuse from people they were living with or being looked after by. Some referenced physical abuse, and others referenced unfair treatment or psychological abuse:

- *“I didn’t feel like I needed to be there and was being treated unfairly. I felt they were controlling my life and making me more unwell.”*
- *“Experienced harassment from numerous different people on different occasions.”*

A number of people referred to their own mental health in contributing to them having concerns about their personal safety, including experiencing psychosis and schizoaffective disorder.

Again, these factors were more commonly disclosed in the survey than identified in the case review. Social isolation was one of the more commonly identified vulnerabilities,

including in 16% of Missing People cases where the person subsequently died, and 7% of cases where they returned. Living in a ‘chaotic home’ was identified in 7% of Missing People and police records.

Something identified in case records that was not disclosed in the survey with missing adults was homelessness. Almost 1 in 5 Missing People records where the person returned had some evidence of the person experiencing homelessness (19%; 37 of 199), and 13% of cases in which the person was still missing. Homelessness was less prevalent in Police records; however it was identified in small number of cases.

In some of these cases the reason for going missing is potentially linked to crime. For example, 14 of the 64 (20%) people responding to the survey disclosed being influenced to go missing due to being in an abusive relationship with someone. In the record review, there was evidence of some cases in which the person was a potential victim of crime at the time when they went missing, including criminal and sexual exploitation, and domestic abuse.

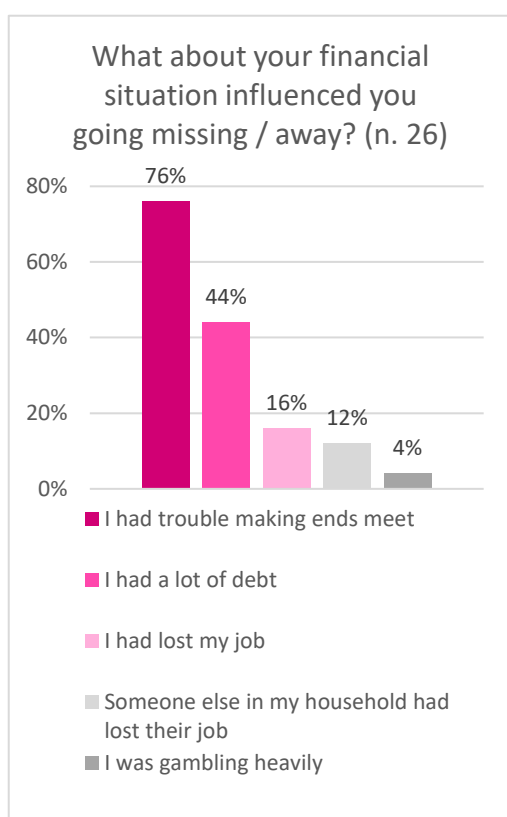
Relationships have been identified in the NCA missing report as a key reason for going missing, but again at a lower level: 13.9% of incidents where a reason was identified specified relationships as being the reason. Previous research has also found that a common reason for going missing is relationship breakdown, including ‘marriage breakdown, when a parent leaves home and conflict between parents and their adult children,’ with 30% of cases where adults decided to leave being due to relationship breakdown.⁵

⁵ Biehal, N. et al, Lost from view: missing persons in the UK, 2003.

Financial problems were linked to missing episodes for almost half of missing adults

41% said that their financial situation influenced their decision to go (26 of 64)

For those responding to the survey for this research, the most common things being experienced are shown in the chart below.



Other kinds of financial worries included being stolen from, being unemployed, and not having any savings. For some people their outgoings linked to their individual situation influenced their decision to leave.

Some spoke of their decision to leave being linked to their finances being drained in some way. Drugs, loansharking, a family member

stealing money were all examples of the kind of situation operating here. Other examples include being charged exorbitant amount of rent, student debt, or more generally being overwhelmed by their situation.

The feelings of stress around finances were clear in some responses:

- *“Things were just getting worse”*
- *“I was the primary person responsible for getting my family food on the table and it was a lot of stress.”*
- *“Just stresses about not being able to look after myself financially”*

Aspects of financial concerns were evident in the case records reviewed. Financial pressures or worries were identified in 9% of Missing People cases where the person died, and 8% of cases where they were found or returned.

Evidence of this was present in a higher proportion of Police records, including in 28% of cases where the person returned from being missing having suffered no harm.

Previous research and police statistics has shown that there are some links with going missing and finances. In NCA statistics 2.3% of incidents were due to ‘financial’ and 1.9% were due to ‘employment.’⁶ *Lost from View* also found links with going missing and individual’s financial situations, particularly in cases where the person had ‘decided’ to be missing.⁷

⁶⁶ National Crime Agency’s UK Missing Persons Unit, Missing Persons Data Report 2019-20

⁷⁷ Biehal, N. et al, *Lost from view: missing persons in the UK*, 2003.

Other presenting risks

In the case record review, there were some common risks and vulnerabilities identified which did not come through in the survey responses. These included:

- Alcohol and drug use
- Dementia
- Leaving without adequate provisions, or leaving without required medication
- Physical health condition
- Learning disability

Conclusions: why do adults go missing?

It is clear that there are a wide range of factors influencing people's decisions to leave, and that these factors intersect in complex ways. The majority of them can be viewed as being 'push' factors, with adults leaving / going missing to get away from or escape one or more things going on in their lives.

And while some influences may be one off incidents, like having an argument with someone, many of the factors disclosed in the survey and evidenced in the records will still exist when the person returns. If a person is feeling unsafe, unsupported or unhappy in their life, or if they are experiencing mental health crisis, risks around suicide, exploitation or many other things, these will still be true on return. As will be seen below, going missing will frequently exacerbate these things.

It is clear that each individual will be experiencing something unique when they go missing, both in terms of their specific reasons for missing and in terms of the risks they may be facing. There was no obvious difference in

the risks and influences of those going missing in terms of the ultimate outcome of their missing episode. This means that the experience of each individual must be taken into consideration in any risk assessment processes when someone is reported missing. It is crucial that those taking the missing report understand as fully as possible what is happening for that person, including exploring:

- The missing person's mental health
- Risks around suicide and previous harm linked to suicide
- Issues at home, including relationship issues
- Whether the missing episode is out of the ordinary

Those making the missing report may not necessarily know some of these things about the missing person, for example they may not know about any mental health diagnosis or previous missing episodes and any related harm experienced. Police risk assessments may need to involve seeking other information from professionals, other relatives or close friends.

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.⁸
- 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 experienced⁹
- 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.¹⁰

⁸ 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>

⁹ The College of Policing's Curiosity guidelines: <https://www.college.police.uk/guidance/vulnerability-related-risks/curiosity>

¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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

¹¹ 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'¹²

- 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 Scotland¹³
- 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

¹² 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.

¹³ National Missing Persons Framework for Scotland, May 2017: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/national-missing-persons-framework-scotland/>