

“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 6: Impact of being 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](#).

The majority of adults return from being missing within 48 hours. In England and Wales, 79% of adults return within 48 hours, and in Northern Ireland this figure is 97%. Police Scotland are unable to provide the breakdown by age, but 74.5% of all missing incidents are less than 24 hours in duration.

In England and Wales the most common way that missing adults return is through being found by the police: in 42.4% of cases the police found missing adults. The next most common ways that missing adults return is through returning of their own free will (29.7%); 'other' (16.6%); being resolved by family members of guardians (7.4%); through their carer or local authority (2%); and then a small number of cases are resolved by friends or acquaintances (1.9%).

In Scotland and Northern Ireland the age breakdown is unavailable, but overall the most common way missing people were found was the same order as in England and Wales.

Responses to Missing People's survey showed a broadly similar picture to the broader missing statistics:

- 44% of people were found by the police (27 of 62)
- 37% got back in touch with family or friends (23 of 62)
- 19% contacted the police to let them know that they were safe and well (12 of 62)
- 13% were found by someone else (8 of 62)

Over half of those responding to the survey said they returned to where they had been missing or away from (32 of 62). There is a key role here for the police in both finding missing people at risk of harm but also ensuring that they are adequately safeguarded, particularly given that many people are returning to

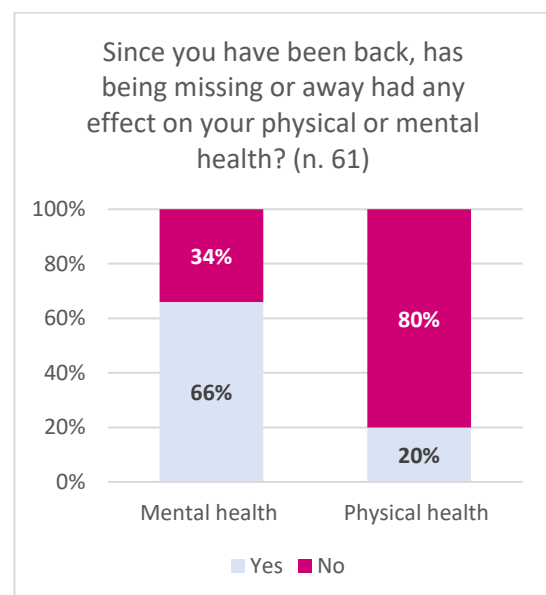
somewhere they felt unsafe or unhappy before they went missing.

The impact of being missing: physical and mental health

2/3rds of missing adults said that being missing had impacted their mental health

Harm caused by being missing is not only experienced by the missing person while they are away. Return can be one of the most difficult times in a missing person's experience, for both the missing person and their loved ones.

The longer-term impacts of being missing can cause significant and varied harm to those adults who have returned, particularly when they are not able to access support to help them with why they went missing or what happened while they were away.



“The period immediately after being missing was even worse than the period before in terms of my mental health, even if the reason I had left was due to a crisis. I would find coming home so hard that often it would leave me feeling worse than whatever had made me leave in the first place”

Only ¼ of those responding to the survey said that being missing or away had had no impact on their physical or mental health (26%; 16 of 61).

20% (12 of 61) said that it had impacted their physical health. A small number of people provided more detail about this, including referencing physical pain, hypothermia, and developing an eating disorder.

Most notably, 2/3rds of those responding to the survey said that being missing or away had impacted their mental health (40 of 61). Where people gave details about this impact, the majority of responses specified that the impact on their mental health was negative.

Some responses spoke of the fact that returning and readjusting to their ‘normal’ life was difficult:

- *“Adjusting back to normal life as 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.”*
- *“It felt hard to get back to normal after returning and I felt guilty for causing worry to family”*
- *“The biggest impact on my health is the way I am treated by others and how they make me feel. If anything, every time I run away, it only gets worse”*

Some spoke of the impact on them of others knowing that they had been missing and knowing information about them:

- *“Having everyone knowing and talking about me made me suicidal [...] it made my mental health much worse”*
- *“Absolutely do not under any circumstances say where the person was found on social media. [...] A public appeal [...] was a massive invasion of my privacy”*

For others, they spoke of their mental health having been negatively affected due to their missing episode, with impacts still being experienced today:

- *“I get flashbacks from experiences I’ve had from going missing”*
- *“I am not eating regularly I am depressed I have severe anxiety and it’s really hard to be around people”*
- *“I gained an eating disorder, fuelled by substance abuse disorder, and have been left with trauma that after several years I’ve been unable to fully recover from”*

More generally some people spoke of the struggles they had experienced with their mental health during and since their missing episode. In some of these responses the significant and varied impacts are very clear:

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- *“I got hypothermia. I missed mental health medication. I suffered paranoia. I suffered anxiety around the police searching for me and restraining me when they found me [...] I felt like I was treated like a child, who wasn’t given the right to make decisions about my own life.”*
- *“I became more depressed and suicidal”*
- *“Made mental health 10 [times] worse this time and physical pain”*
- *“Deep trauma and schizophrenia”*

While the majority of those responding to the survey gave information about their mental health being made worse by being missing, for a small number of people their missing episode had resulted in an improvement.

These responses spoke of it being a trigger to being able to access support, or that going missing had meant they escaped a situation they were unhappy or unsafe. There was also a sense that being missing had allowed a fresh start in life:

- *“Getting away from everyone / thing did me a world of good – I don’t think I’d be who I am now had I not walked when I did / I do not regret that rainy Friday night ever – it was the best thing I did”*
- *“I returned once but the time away made me stronger and more able to stand up to the abuse. When I left the second time, I never returned [...] I’m content in my decision and my life is much better without the abuse”*
- *“It got me signposted to the right help”*

The impact of being missing: relationships, work and finances

Those completing the survey were also asked about the impact on other aspects of their lives. The responses can be seen in the chart below.

For some people, the responses showed that the impact of being missing was felt on many different aspects of their life:

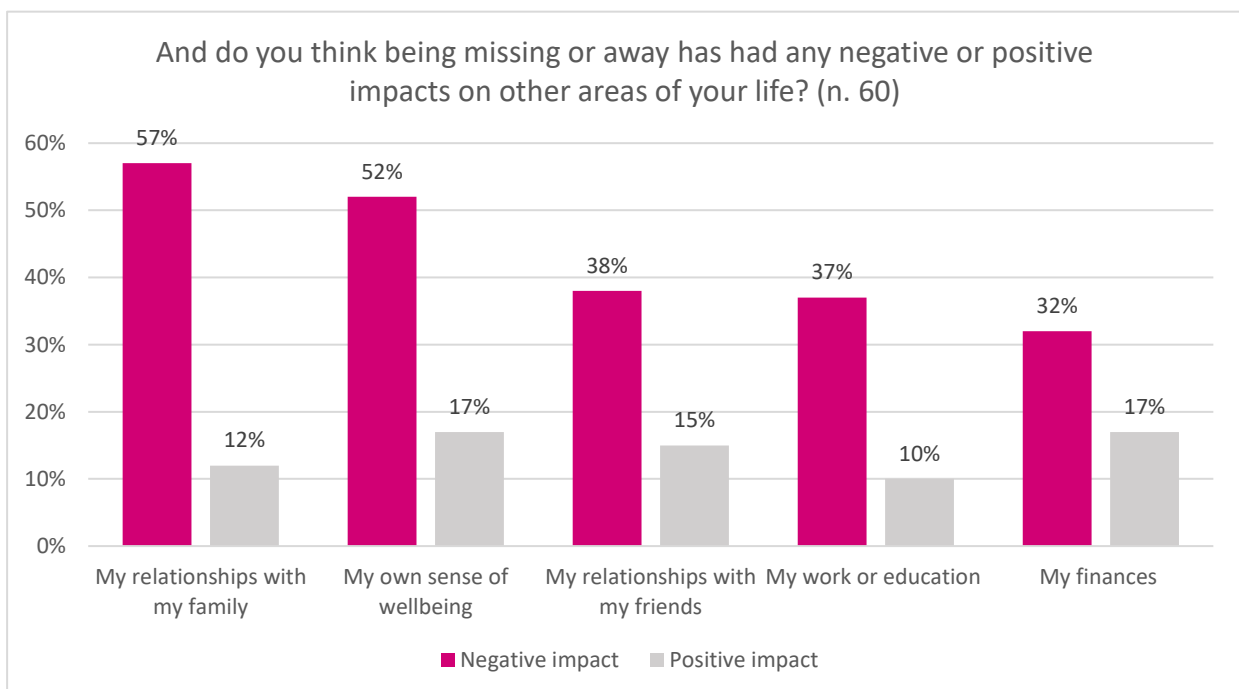
- *“Family – it caused lots of arguments on my return the relationship was strained and cautious at first. Friends – a lot of judgement, a lot of lost friendships. Work / education – I lost my job, I dropped out of university. Finances – I spent what little money I had on drugs and food. Wellbeing – trauma and assaults”*
- *“Sometimes had a negative impact on work / education if I missed periods during to being missing. Definitely caused a strained relationship with my mum as it*

would massively negatively affect her mental health as she’d worry about me [...]”

- *“It’s had a largely negative impact on my life knowing that I’ve left and gone missing without realising”*

The response to being reported missing or being away was highlighted in the comments to this question as having a negative impact on some individuals:

- *“Negative in the way that it led to me being harmed, police / lifeboat / fire / ambulance getting involved, forced into treatments / positions / places I didn’t want, restrained and medicated [...]”*
- *“I feel as though I am permanently labelled as having mental health problems now”*
- *“I became a recluse because of the publicity”*



- *“The fuss and media appeal sent everything spiralling and was the absolute worst that could have happened. The consequences that cause have had a massive negative impact on recovery and state of mind”*

In some responses the complicated situations people are in when they go missing or away were clear, as well as the competing push and pull factors that can be at play:

- *“I was so used to go missing that it felt hard to stop. Like the chaos felt safer. It felt safer to run away where people were concerned about me and looking for me rather than being home with no one worries, no one thinking anything was wrong.”*
- *“At times it’s been lonely, having no family at all and no one to turn to in times of need BUT I have some great friends and I am much happier not having abusive people in my life”*
- *“I shed the flight: fight persona I’d hid behind for years – learnt how to love me for me [...] learnt to trust others and love others, worked hard to get what I wanted in life”*

As in the question about physical and mental health, some people spoke of the positives that have come from being missing or away, or positives that happen when you are away:

- *“Normal people call it ‘time out.’ It’s great. It gives space to think and get your head together before going back to the mayhem of everyday life”*

- *“On wellbeing – being missing itself would improve it, coming home would make it worse”*
- *“Positive in the way I often received more care and got to be away from the house for a while, and be in more control”*

Some responses were short, but clearly showed the negative impact and the challenges being faced by some of the adults who have been missing or away:

- *“I felt like I wasn’t being listened to so I thought let me go away and I wanted to die or I wanted to live a whole different life and it was hard”*
- *“Noticing no-one cares hurts so much”*
- *“Can’t believe it happened to me”*
- *“Very negative”*
- *“Isolation”*

Nearly 40,000 of the 140,000 missing adult incidents each year are repeat missing episodes. It is therefore crucial that the point of return is taken as an opportunity to try to help missing adults not to go missing again.

This research has demonstrated the huge range, scale and complexities of risks, vulnerabilities and harms being experienced by adults who go missing. The identification of these is critical in fully understanding what is going on for missing adults, and what support they might need. And many of these things may have been exacerbated by the person being missing.

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.¹
- 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 experienced²
- 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.³

¹ 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>

² The College of Policing's Curiosity guidelines: <https://www.college.police.uk/guidance/vulnerability-related-risks/curiosity>

³³ 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.⁴ 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

⁴ 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'⁵

- 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 Scotland⁶
- 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

⁵ 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.

⁶ National Missing Persons Framework for Scotland, May 2017: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/national-missing-persons-framework-scotland/>