"MY WORLD WAS FALLING APART"

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

missing people

A lifeline when someone disappears

April 2022

Missing People is the only charity in the UK which is dedicated to supporting those affected by missing. The charity provides specialist support to people who are at risk of missing, and the families and friends left behind. The charity runs a free, confidential helpline that is available by phone, text and email to support missing children and adults, and their loved ones, as well as other front-line services to support anyone affected by missing.

Missing People can be contacted by phoning or texting 116 000, or by e-mailing 116000@missingpeople.org.uk.

Understanding the reasons why people go missing and the impact on families left behind enables Missing People and our partners to provide better services. Missing People's research team conducts research and evaluation projects on a range of topics, and recent research can be found at https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/for-professionals/information-and-policy/information-and-research.

Authors

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Foreword

"I have gone missing several times in my life. There were different reasons why I disappeared or absconded. There were different harms. There were different outcomes. But two things were always the same.

No one asked me why I felt I had to go, and no one asked me what happened to me whilst I was missing. Going missing is a unique experience, which may make it hard to reconnect with other people upon return. This important report from Missing People addresses these issues, as well as looking at what happens when someone returns, and how to support someone to prevent future 'missing' episodes.

People do not go missing for 'fun' or because they are feeling happy. There are so many reasons why someone may have gone missing; mental health issues, homelessness, domestic situation and fleeing abuse or violence are the main reasons identified by Missing People. The story of each person who has gone missing deserves to be heard, and lessons should be identified and learned.

These days, with the relentless use of social media, being reported as missing can have a far-reaching impact on the person once they return. It is not easy to erase a digital footprint about an episode in your life, that you may be trying to move on from. And it is not easy to deal with the recriminations from other people around you, who may have been affected by a missing episode.

This report highlights the importance of 'return interviews', and appropriate support for the missing person, once they return. Going missing and being missing are complex situations, and harm is not always reported. It is therefore likely to be underestimated. It is crucial that agencies work together in a supportive way to prevent future missing episodes and correctly record harm. This report is just the beginning of that journey, but a significant beginning. I really hope this is the start of developing a pathway to support missing people on their return."

Tanja Conway-Grim

"Staffordshire Police were pleased to have the opportunity to become involved with this piece of research to explore the links between adults who go missing and the harm they come to whilst they are missing. There are many complex reasons that can trigger an adult to go missing and it's clear that when they are found their problems will not have gone away, in fact they can be further compounded by the missing episode which may increase the risk of repeat missing reports.

At the point of return it's important to work with these vulnerable adults to understand the reasons for their missing episode to ensure a holistic response including safeguarding and signposting to appropriate support. This research will help to influence the way in which police and partner agencies respond to missing adults when they are found."

Chief Inspector Robert Taylor, Staffordshire Police

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Research aims

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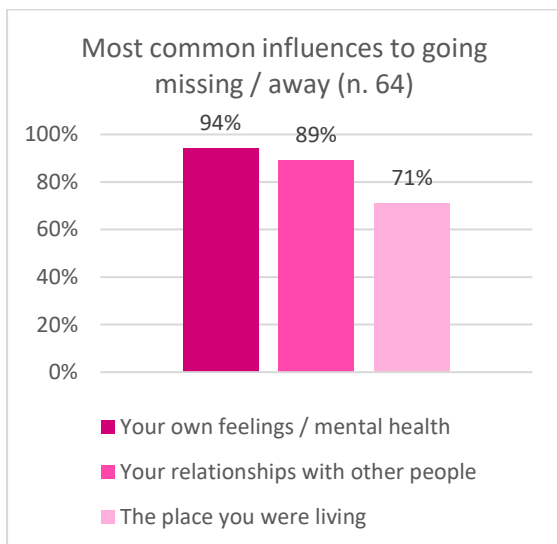3. Identify how Missing People, the police and other agencies need to respond to missing adults to prevent and reduce harm.

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

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.

Most common influences to going missing / away (n. 64)

- 94% Your own feelings / mental health
- 89% Your relationships with other people
- 71% The place you were living

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 nearly 1 in 4 experiencing physical violence or force.

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."

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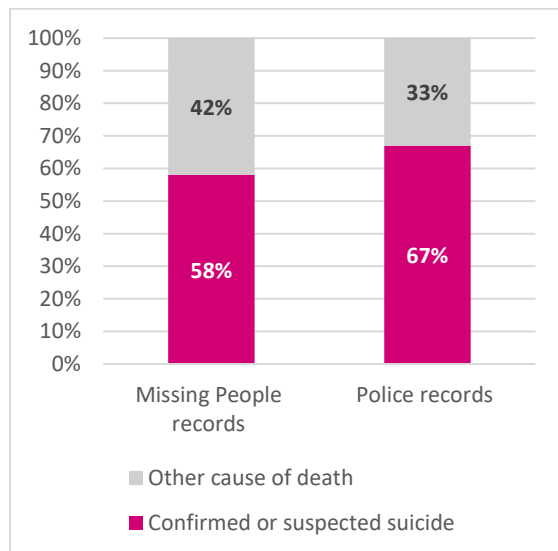
Going missing can exacerbate risk: 66% of returned missing adults disclosed that being missing had impacted their mental health

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

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

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.

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]

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[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

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[3]

- 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]

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[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

[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

Return

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

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

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[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 Scotland[7]

- 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

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[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/

Background and research aims

Almost 400 adults are reported missing in the UK every day.[8] And while existing research has established some links between certain types of harm and missing[9], very little is known about why adults go missing, whether and how they come to harm while missing, and the impact being missing has on their life when they return.

There are some limited police statistics around harm: the most recent National Crime Agency figures show that 10% of missing adult incidents result in the person coming to harm.[10] However, these figures do not demonstrate the true extent of harm experienced by missing people. This is because:

a) The missing statistics only include information actually shared by a returned missing person with the police or harm that may be easily identified by the police on their return
b) Information may be stored elsewhere in police systems and not in missing records, for example in victim or crime reports
c) The statistics are dependent on accurate recording and reporting in found reports

This is explicitly recognised by the NCA: *"[it] is based on an officer's interpretation, as well as being dependent on the accuracy with which the officer completes the report and how it is later transposed onto COMPACT. In addition, the report relies on disclosures by a missing person as to whether they came to any harm while missing."[11]*

The experiences of missing adults need to be better understood to ensure improved responses to adults at the point of reporting, during the investigation, and at the point of return.

This research therefore aims to:

1. Identify why adults go missing and how this links to harm or risk 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

The findings will:

- Inform risk assessment processes and broader responses to missing by the police

- Be used to improve the support offered by Missing People and other charities supporting people who have been missing

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[8] Nearly 100,000 adults go missing in nearly 140,000 episodes. National Crime Agency's UK Missing Persons Unit, Missing Persons Data Report 2019-20 (but with some estimations for Scotland figures), https://nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/who-we-are/publications/501-uk-missing-persons-unit-data-report-2019-2020

[9] See for example Berelowitz, S., Firmin, C., Edwards, G. and Gulyurtlu, S. 'I thought I was the only one. The only one in the world'. The Office of the Children's Commissioner's Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Gangs and Groups, 2012; Sturrock, R. and Holmes, L. Running the Risks: The links between gang involvement and young people going missing, Missing People and Catch-22, 2015; Rees, G. and Lee, J. Findings from the Second National Survey of Young Runaways, The Children's Society, 2005.

[10] National Crime Agency's UK Missing Persons Unit, Missing Persons Data Report 2019-20

[11] National Crime Agency's UK Missing Persons Unit, Missing Persons Data Report 2019-20

- Inform responses when people return from being missing to prevent them from going missing again, ensuring that these responses are trauma-informed and reflect the harm experienced by missing people

- Increase the understanding of the support needed to reduce the impact of harm experienced while missing, with the ultimate aim of reducing the chance of going missing and being in harm's way again

Methodology

A mixed-methods approach has been used in this research. The research principally involves four different aspects:

1. Literature review

A literature review was conducted of relevant recent research in this area. This literature review covered relevant research focused on:

- Missing adults
- Harm, and how that relates to missing adults
- Suicide and missing
- Dementia and missing
- Risk assessment and police responses to missing adults

This review ultimately identified 26 sources, providing an overview of the existing research in this area.

2. Missing People records

For this research data was drawn from police referrals to the Missing People charity in the year 2019-20.[12]

For the sampling of these records, there was a population of 1,273 publicity cases.[13] In terms of analysis for this research the population was stratified by outcome of the case:

- Fatal outcome
- Still missing
- Found / returned

Record type	Number of records	Percentage of records
Fatal outcome	89	20.9%
Still missing	137	32.2%
Found / returned	199	46.8%
Total	425	

All cases in which there was a fatal outcome (7%) of the overall population were included in the analysis, as were all cases in which the person was still missing (13%). A random sample of 199 cases was taken from those cases where the person was found or had returned. Cases in which the person had died while away and cases in which the person was

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[12] Police forces across the UK can refer missing person cases to the charity Missing People. These referrals will typically involve Missing People assisting in trying to find the person through publicity appeals and / or providing support to the family of the missing person.

[13] A publicity appeal is used to help find the missing person. Missing People offer a number of different types of publicity, including circulating briefings to the Safeguarding Briefing Network partners local to where the person went missing, and releasing public appeals if the person has been missing for at least seven days. For more information about publicity please see Missing People's website: https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/police-services/publicity.

still missing were over-sampled in order to provide a large enough sample for analysis.

The majority of this analysis will break down the cases on the basis of their final outcome.

3. Police records

Staffordshire Police shared a sample of their missing person reports for this research. All records where the missing adult was recorded as having come to harm in 2019-20 were provided, as were a random sample of 25 records where the person had not been recorded as coming to harm. The records were the full missing person record, so included the missing report, any sightings, and the found report.

Again, the majority of this analysis will break down the cases on the basis of the harm recorded.

Record type	Number of records	Percentage of records
Fatal harm	18	14.4%
Other harm	82	65.6%
No harm	25	20%
Total	125	

4. Primary research with adults who have been missing

A survey was developed to seek the experiences of adults who have been missing.

This survey was completed by 64 adults who have been missing. The participants self-identified that they had been missing as an adult and we do not know if any of the participants were the same as those whose records were analysed.

Limitations

The principal limitation to this research stems from the data used in the analysis. The majority of the records used for this research contain information shared about the missing person by people other than the missing person themselves.

In order for risks, vulnerabilities and harms to have been captured and analysed in this research they must have been present in the records being analysed. There are two main reasons why this is a limitation.

Firstly, risks, vulnerabilities and harms must have been either reported to or identified by the person / people completing the relevant reports. In terms of making a missing report, this necessitates the reporting person, or others involved in the response to the missing episode, to have knowledge of and share information about risks, vulnerabilities and harm. And in terms of returning from being missing, this necessitates the missing person being willing and able to share what happened to them while missing. It is well evidenced that harm is not always disclosed straight away, and that some may be reluctant to disclose harm to the police at all.[14]

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[14] For example, only around 15% of those who experience sexual violence report to the police (January 2013, An overview of sexual offending in England and Wales, Home Office and Ministry of Justice); Self-reporting of sexual assault remains much higher than the number of sexual offences recorded by the police (Sexual offences in England and Wales overview: year ending March 2020, ONS, March 2021); In the year ending March 2018, only 18% of women who had experienced partner abuse in the last 12 months reported it to the

For the Missing People records included in this analysis, there is a particular limitation related to the person returning from being missing. While often details are shared with Missing People about risks and vulnerabilities being experienced by missing people when they are reported missing, when someone returns from being missing the police inform the charity that they have returned, and the outcome of the case, but usually provide little detail about what happened while they were away.

The second limitation relates to the level of recording and detail included in records analysed. If harm is disclosed, it needs to have been identified and recorded accurately. The police do not always have the adequate resources to respond fully to missing person reports or training in how to best respond when a missing person returns. This includes being able to fully record and debrief a missing episode.[15]

These limitations mean that the absence of a risk, vulnerability or harm in the record does not necessarily mean that these have not been experienced. The data included in this research should be seen as the minimum scale of risk, vulnerability or harm, but it is assumed that the actual scale is higher.

In terms of the police force data, only a small number of cases in which the person had been recorded as not coming to harm on their found report were reviewed for this research. This means comparisons cannot be made between the records in which harm was recorded in the found report and these

records, and an overall prevalence of harm within those records cannot be determined.

The survey conducted with missing adults provides more detail and evidence about the harms experienced by adults who have been missing, filling the gaps and limitations that exist in the analysis of records.

Another limitation relates to the representativeness of the data. Missing People records will not necessarily be representative of all missing cases, and the survey was self-selecting. This means that we cannot assume that the results will be generalisable to all missing adults. However, the scale of records reviewed and range of data sources give confidence that the key findings are relevant across the population of missing adults.

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police (https://www.womensaid.org.uk/information-support/what-is-domestic-abuse/how-common-is-domestic-abuse/); only one in four victims of hate crime report to the police (Hate Crime, England and Wales, 2014/15, Home Office, October 2015); The NPCC 2020-22 National Vulnerability Action Plan recognised that barriers exist, stating that: "*Victimisation can often be traumatic and for some people and communities, either due to culture, experience or perception, reporting to the police may be difficult*" (National Vulnerability Action Plan (NVAP) revised 2020-2022 v2, College of Policing and National Police Chiefs' Council, August 2020).

[15] M. Greenhalgh & K. Shalev-Greene, *Impact of police cuts on missing person investigations,* July 2021 (https://pure.port.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/28691081/Final_version.pdf).

Research findings

This research will present the findings in terms of the different stages of a typical 'missing journey,' including the historic harm and triggers that contribute to someone going missing, what happens to them while missing including any harm experienced, and their situation on return. However, it should be noted that the harm that can trigger a missing episode can still exist after the person returns, for example in situations where the person is suffering from domestic violence, exploitation or abuse.

A typology of harm was developed for this research, drawing both on previous research considering harm experienced while missing and on Missing People's knowledge and expertise on the issue:

Category of harm	Definition
Suicide	Death by suicide
Other fatal harm	Harm resulting in the person dying
Non-fatal harm linked to suicide	Any non-fatal harm related to suicide, including suicide attempt, plans or thoughts of suicide.
Self-harm	Where the missing person had hurt themselves physically, including inflicting cuts or other physical harm.
Self-neglect	Where the person experienced harm due to not being able to care for their own essential needs.
Physical harm	Where the person suffered physical harm, including injuries, assault, or accident.
Emotional or psychological harm	This would include where the person had experienced threats, fear or intimidation.
Sexual harm	Where the person had experienced sexual violence, abuse, or any unwanted behaviour of a sexual nature.
Financial / material harm	Where the person had experienced harm related to their finances or their possessions, including theft or damage.
Other harm	This enabled recording of any harm not falling into the above.

Before going missing

The reasons an adult goes missing are frequently complex. They can include vulnerabilities that may have been present for many years, through to new issues that arose just before they went missing, or a combination of the two. This research aims to explore the longer-term historic experiences of adults who then go on to be missing, as well as the short-term triggers they experience at the time of going missing.

In attempting to understand as fully as possible these experiences, the prevalence of harm experienced in the medium to long-term, and how often this was known or reported when someone goes missing has been considered in the research.

It is important to note that this research only includes where that harm is already known and is included in the records. Historic harm is only likely to be disclosed in the context of a missing report if the person making the report is aware of it and also deems it to be relevant to the person going missing. Given this, it is anticipated that the harm recorded will be lower than the actual harm experienced. [16]

Harm experienced in the past

Legend:
- ■ Police records fatal outcome cases (n. 18)
- ■ Police records where the person suffered harm while missing (n. 82)
- ■ Missing People fatal outcome cases (n. 89)
- ■ Missing People found / returned cases (n. 199)
- ■ Missing People still missing cases (n. 137)
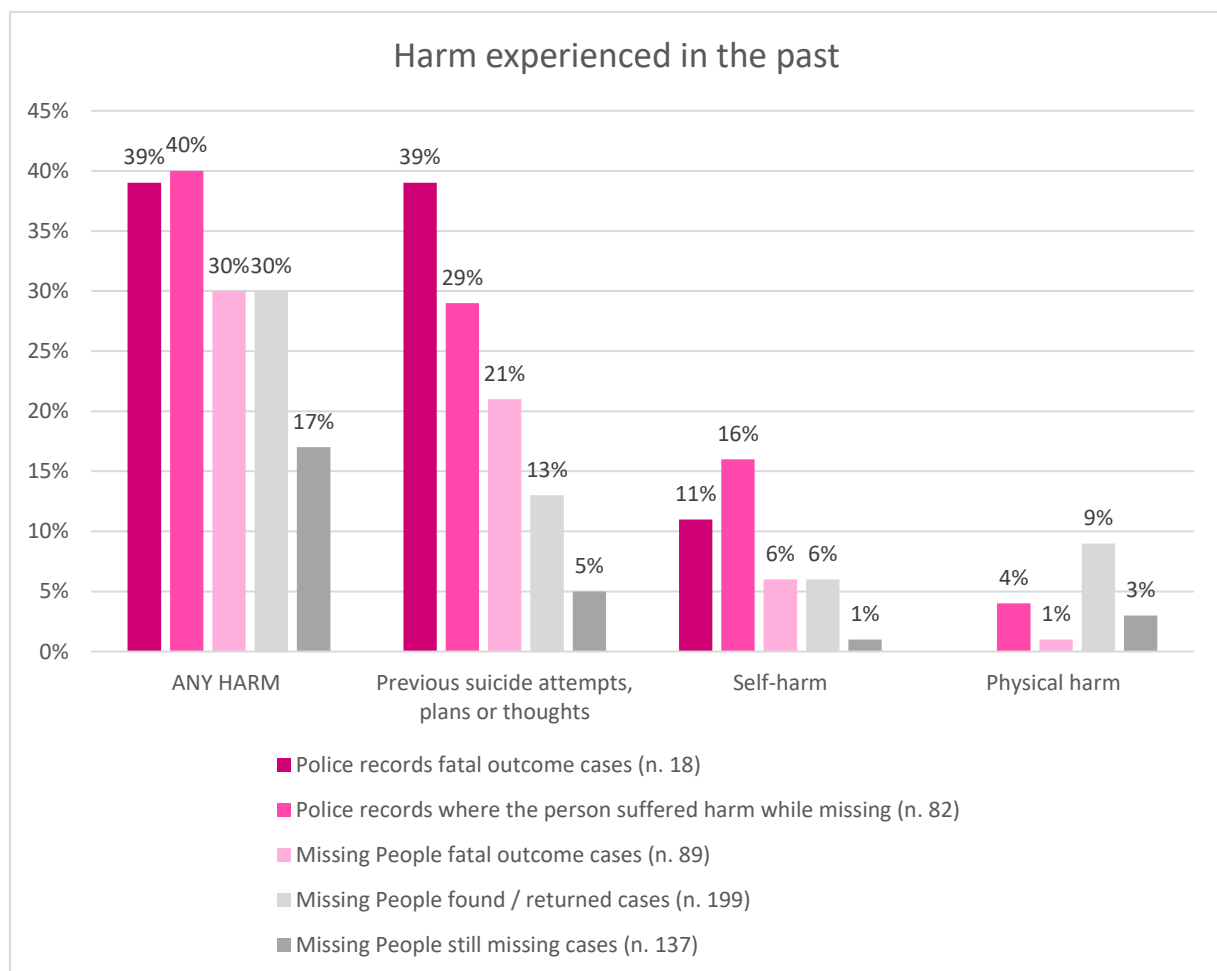
[16] For a full data table, please see Appendix E

The chart above shows the most prevalent past harms identified in Missing People and police records as a percentage of the total number of cases analysed.

In Missing People records where the case had a recorded final outcome, 30% of missing adults had experienced some kind of historic harm: this was the case for adults who returned from being missing (26 of 89) and for those who died while missing (59 of 199). In those cases where the person was still missing, the prevalence of historic harms was less, at 17%.

There was a higher prevalence of historic harm within police records, at 39% for fatal outcome cases (7 of 18) and 40% for those cases in which the person returned but had suffered harm while away (33 of 82). The most common harm experienced in the past was linked to suicide attempt or ideation.

The chart above presents data broken down by outcome of the case, showing that suffering historic harm linked to suicide is most prevalent in cases where the person subsequently died while they were missing. In these cases, where the records also evidenced historic harm, in almost all cases where the person died while missing they were known or suspected of attempting to take their own life or having suicidal thoughts in the past (80% of Missing People fatal outcome records and 100% of police fatal outcome records where historic harm was evidenced).
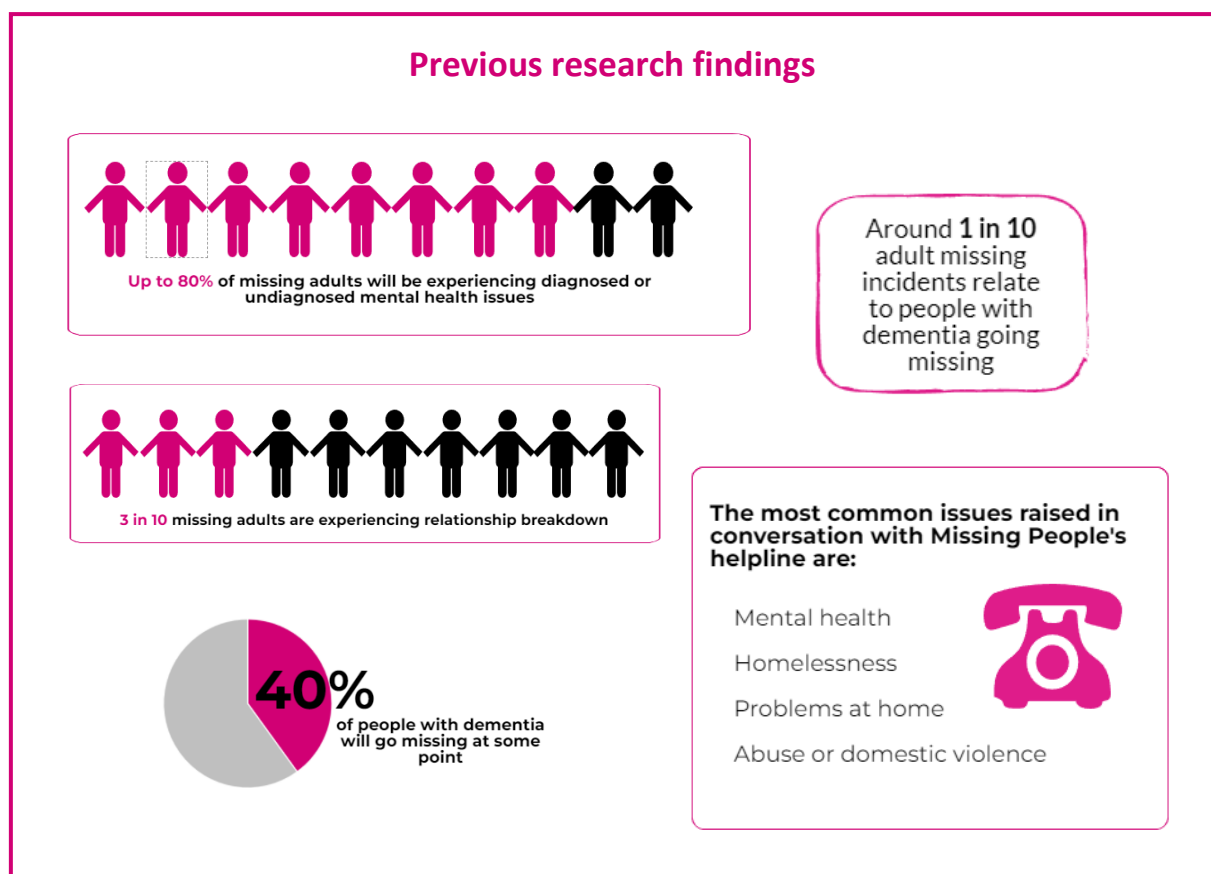
A smaller proportion of people who had returned from being missing were known or suspected of experiencing suicide related harm in the past, but it remained the most common type of harm experienced.

Why do adults go missing? Review of records

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.[17] 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. [18] 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 response, including the level of resource assigned to searching for the person.

Previous research findings

Up to 80% of missing adults will be experiencing diagnosed or undiagnosed mental health issues

Around 1 in 10 adult missing incidents relate to people with dementia going missing

3 in 10 missing adults are experiencing relationship breakdown

40% of people with dementia will go missing at some point

The most common issues raised in conversation with Missing People's helpline are:

Mental health

Homelessness

Problems at home

Abuse or domestic violence

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[17] 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.

[18] By risks and vulnerabilities, we broadly mean something about an individual's 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.

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.

Harm immediately before going missing

Legend:
- Police records fatal outcome cases (n. 18)
- Police records where the person suffered harm while missing (n. 82)
- Missing People fatal outcome cases (n. 89)
- Missing People found / returned cases (n. 199)
- Missing People still missing cases (n. 137)
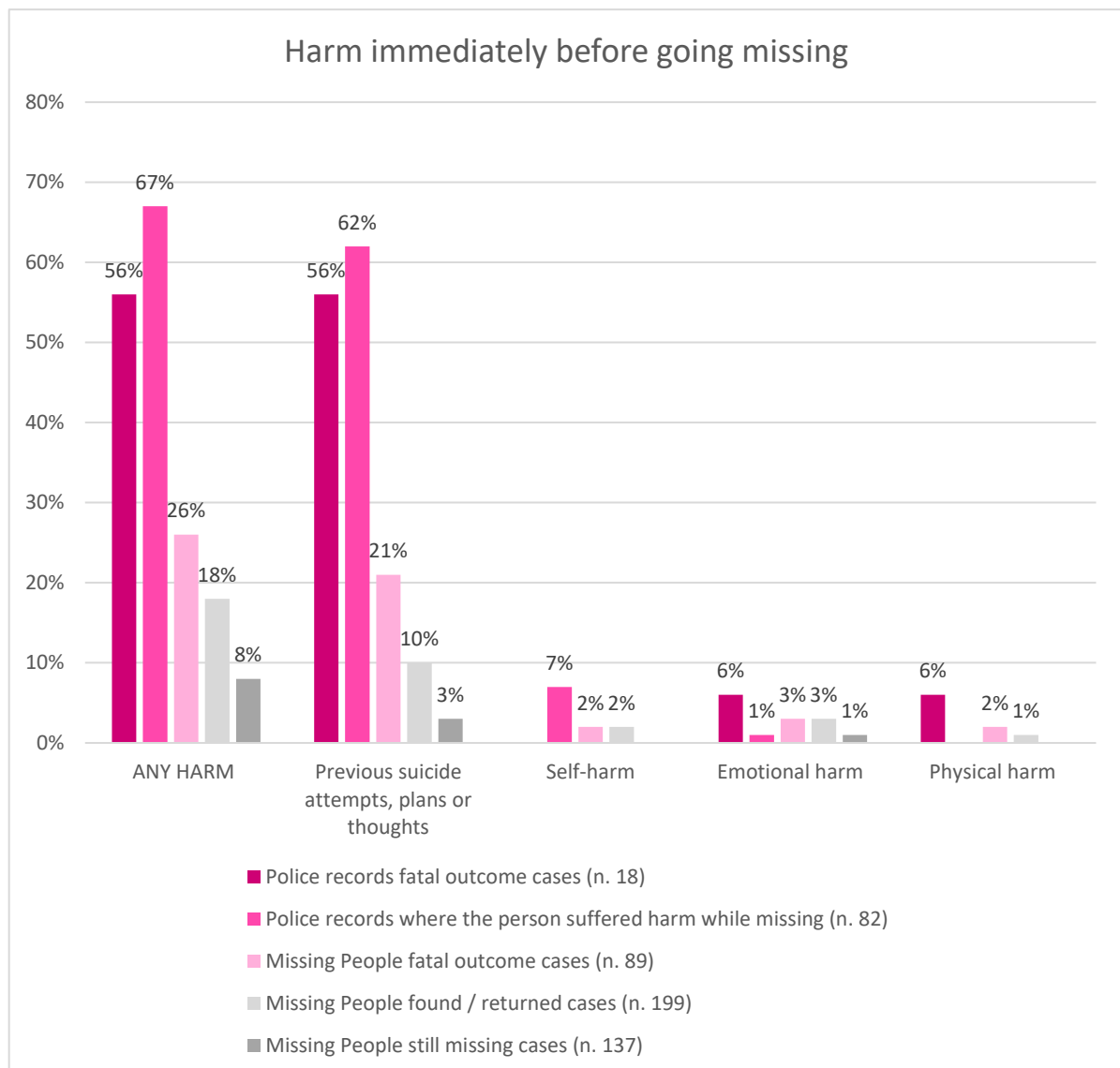
Why do adults go missing?
Survey with missing adults [19]

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.

To what extend did the following things influence you going away / missing? (n. 64)

Factor	Percentage
Your own feelings / mental health	94%
Your relationships with other people	89%
The place you were living	71%
Concerns about your personal safety	56%
Financial situation / money worries	41%

'Definitely and possibly influenced'

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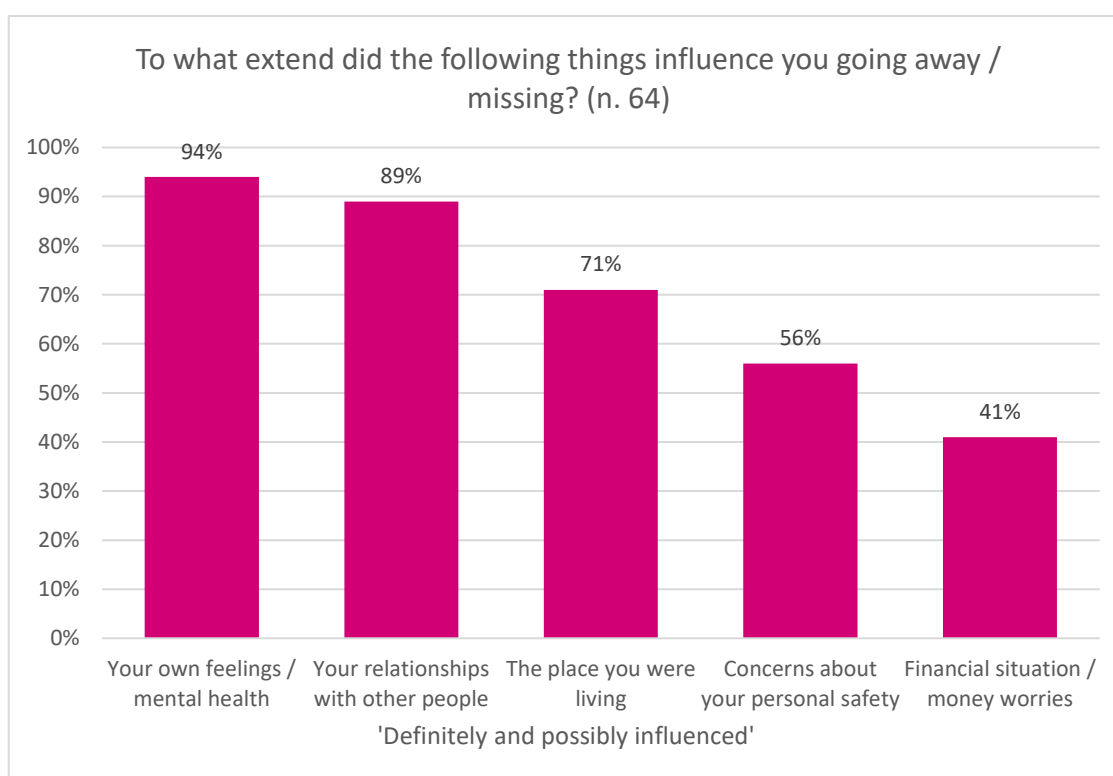
[19] For more detail about the survey responses to this question, please see Appendix B

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.

What about your own feelings / mental health influenced you to go missing / away? (n. 59)

Influence	Percentage
I was feeling that I couldn't cope	85%
I just wanted to get away	80%
I was depressed	71%
I was feeling suicidal	64%
I felt I couldn't share my feelings with anyone	61%
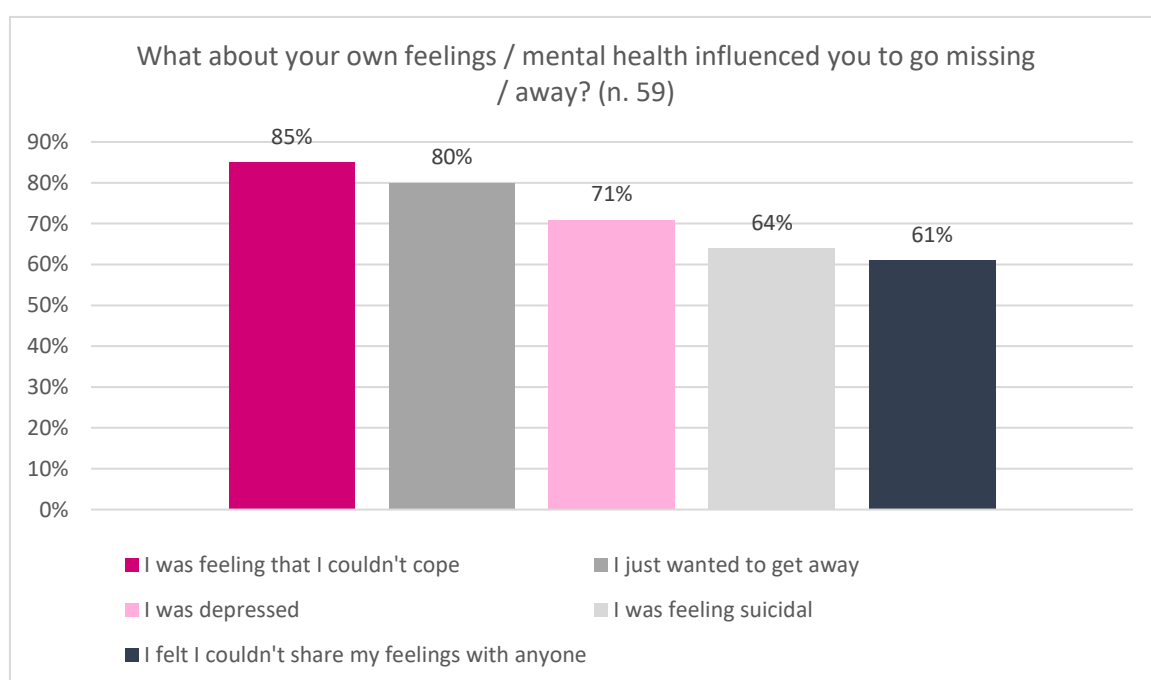
- *"Psychosis, forced to stop my mental health medication, delusions, hallucinations, paranoia, feeling like home was suffocating, feeling my abusive support workers were going to kill me."*

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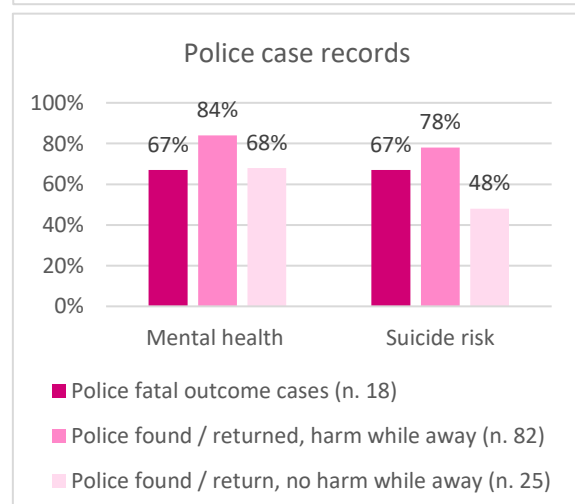
- *"I was [experiencing] very low moods and wanted to end it and I felt like there wasn't enough support in place to be able to pick myself up."*

- *"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:

Missing People case records

- Missing People fatal outcome cases (n. 89)
- Missing people found / returned cases (n. 199)
- Missing people still missing cases (n. 137)

	Mental health	Suicide risk
Fatal outcome	53%	37%
Found / returned	56%	22%
Still missing	31%	10%

Police case records

- Police fatal outcome cases (n. 18)
- Police found / returned, harm while away (n. 82)
- Police found / return, no harm while away (n. 25)

	Mental health	Suicide risk
Fatal outcome	67%	67%
Found / returned, harm	84%	78%
Found / return, no harm	68%	48%

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 bi-polar 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).
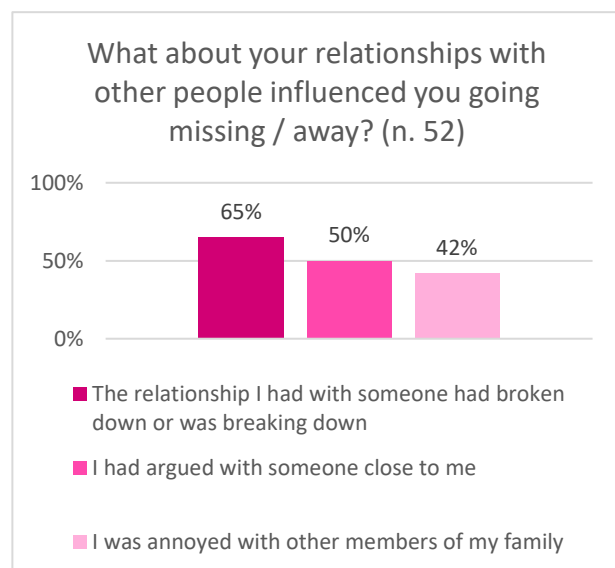
In NCA statistics mental health is the most commonly identified reason for adults going missing, but at a lower rate than disclosed in this survey: where a reason for missing was disclosed, in 25.5% of cases the reason was due to mental health.[20] In a further 12.7% of cases the reason was linked to 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.[21]

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:

What about your relationships with other people influenced you going missing / away? (n. 52)

- The relationship I had with someone had broken down or was breaking down — 65%
- I had argued with someone close to me — 50%
- I was annoyed with other members of my family — 42%

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

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[20] 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.
[21] '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.
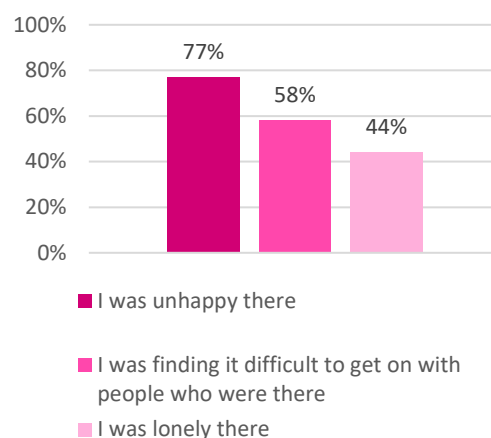
Relationship breakdown was identified in 9% of Missing People cases where the person died while they were missing and in only 5% of cases where the person returned. It was identified in 1 in 3 Police cases where the

person returned safe and well. Domestic violence was identified in a small number of cases.

> **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)

- I was unhappy there
- I was finding it difficult to get on with people who were there
- I was lonely there

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

- I did not feel safe where I was staying
- I was being emotionally bullied by someone
- I was in an abusive relationship with someone
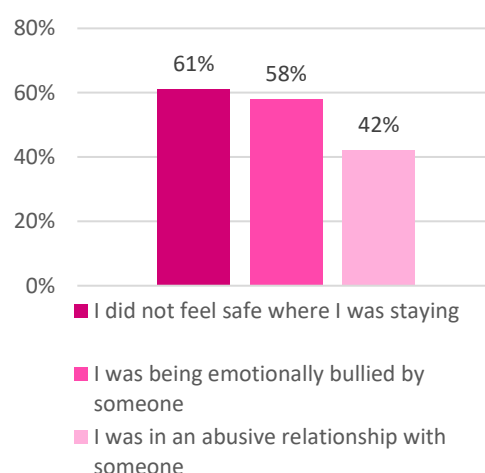
When asking people what other concerns about their own personal safety they had at the time they went missing, responses spoke of concerns both related to other people and about their own actions or responses to what they were experiencing.

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 a 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.[22]

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[22] 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 issues faced by those experiencing financial challenge 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 financial 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.'[23] *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.[24]

What about your financial situation influenced you going missing / away? (n. 26)

- I had trouble making ends meet — 76%
- I had a lot of debt — 44%
- I had lost my job — 16%
- Someone else in my household had lost their job — 12%
- I was gambling heavily — 4%

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[23] National Crime Agency's UK Missing Persons Unit, Missing Persons Data Report 2019-20
[24] Biehal, N. et al, Lost from view: missing persons in the UK, 2003.

Other presenting risks[25]

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.

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[25] For a full data breakdown please see Appendix D

Harm experienced while missing

As is the case with missing adults more generally, there is limited research about the harm missing adults experience while missing and the research that does exist tends to use police data.

In NCA statistics, only 10.5% of incidents related to missing adults result in harm being recorded. Where harm has been recorded, the most common types of harm are self-harm (49.5%), physical injury (34.5%) and accidental harm (8.5%). Emotional harm has been recorded in 5% of cases where harm has been identified, and in 3% of cases the person has been identified to be a sexual offence victim. In 18% of cases where harm has occurred the harm is unspecified. However, as stated above, it is thought that the NCA statistics are an underestimate of the true scale of harm experienced by missing people.

Previous research from 2015 considered whether harm had occurred and distinguished between crime harm and non-crime harm. Where the harm was considered to be criminal, this harm was then distinguished between cases where the person was a suspect or a victim.

For non-crime harm, this mainly involved suicide or self-harm. This research examined 6,000 cases from Thames Valley Police over a six-month period, does not distinguish between children and adults, and concludes that the risk of harm to missing persons is relatively low.[26]

Research from 2017[27] sets out a detailed framework for exploring the relationship between missing and harm, using data from 14 English and Welsh police forces. This research considers whether there was harm, the type of harm, whether it was fatal or non-fatal, criminal or non-criminal, and finally whether it was accidental, homicide, financial, psychological, physical or sexual.

This research found that males were more likely to have a fatal outcome, and that older adults were more likely to have come to harm, as were those missing from home rather than care, and those who had previously been missing.

Those who had indicated an intention to take their own life had an almost 50:50 chance of coming to harm, as did those suffering from dementia. On the other hand, those with a range of mental disorders and other conditions, or those with drug or alcohol issues tended not to come to harm.

Research focusing on suicide and missing has found that a large proportion of adults (82% of 71 cases) who were suspected of taking their own life while missing were experiencing four or more vulnerability indicators, such as depression, relationship issues, drinking and drug issues.[28] This research was also based on COMPACT data from one police force between 2014 and 2018.

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[26] Vo, Q. T. (2015). 6000 cases of missing and absent persons: Patterns of crime harm and priorities for resource allocation [MA Thesis]. Cambridge.

[27] Eales, N. (2017). Risky business? A study exploring the relationship between harm and risk indicators in missing adult incidents, University of Portsmouth

[28] Yong, H., & Tzani-Pepelasis, C. (2019), Suicide and associated vulnerability indicators in adult missing persons: Implications for the police risk assessment. Journal of Police and Criminal Psychology, 1 – 13.

Previous research has also found that the risks of harm are substantial for some missing people with dementia.[29]

In this research two different types of missing case have been considered:

1. Cases in which the person returned / was found
2. Cases in which the person died while away

Cases in which the person is still missing were also considered, but due to the general lack of available information about those cases, those findings will not be presented here. For an overview of these cases please see below.

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[29] Bantry White, E., & Montgomery, P., (2015). Dementia, walking outdoors and getting lost: incidence, risk factors and consequences from dementia-related police missing-person reports, Aging & Mental Health, 19(3), 224-230.

Cases where the person returned / was found

Records held by Missing People and those shared by the police force were analysed to determine how prevalent different harms were for missing adults who had returned from being missing:
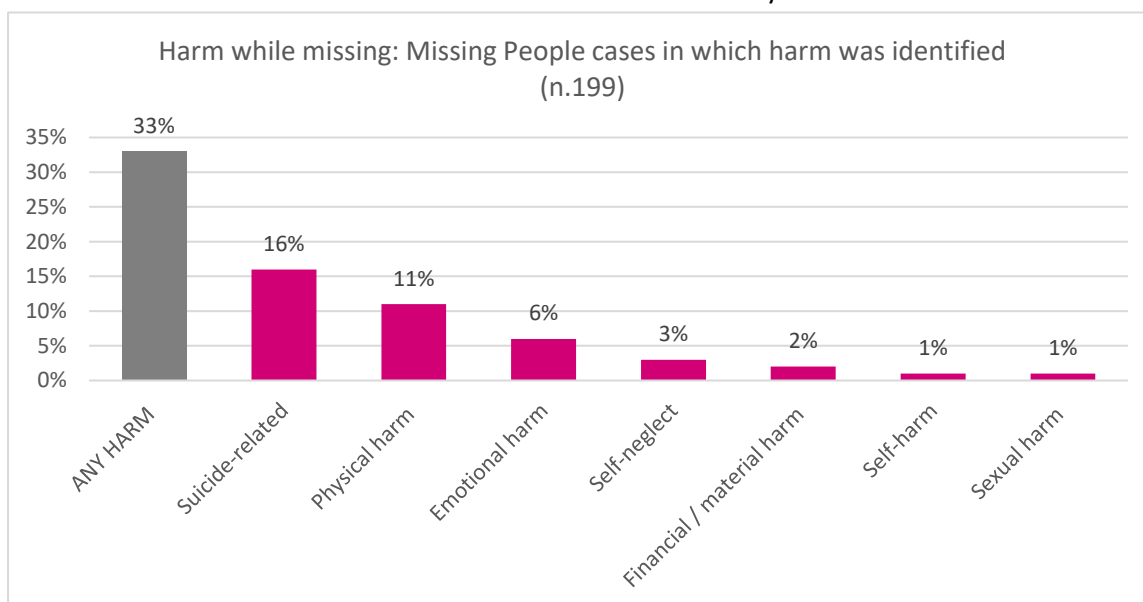
- 199 Missing People records were reviewed
- 82 police records were reviewed – which is all of the cases where Staffordshire police had recorded that the person had come to harm while missing and had returned. This is 7% of all incidents in the police force that year and represented 8% of missing adults.[30]

As above, different 'types' of harm were considered. Some of these harms should be considered as crime harms, and where they are experienced that person should be thought of a victim of crime. These include physical harm, sexual harm and in some cases will include financial / material harm, for example where someone has something stolen while they are missing.

As stated above, it is likely that any harm will be under-recorded as it depends on Missing People or the police being told about that harm. This is particularly the case for Missing People records, where records typically hold more limited information about what happened to the person while they were missing.

In the 199 cases reviewed from Missing People records, 1 in 3 people experienced harm while missing (65 of 199; 33%). The table below shows how this harm is broken down, noting that some people had experienced more than one type of harm. As can be seen below the most prevalent type of harm was linked to suicide, with 16% of missing adults coming to suicide-related harm while away.

Harm while missing: Missing People cases in which harm was identified (n.199)

- ANY HARM: 33%
- Suicide-related: 16%
- Physical harm: 11%
- Emotional harm: 6%
- Self-neglect: 3%
- Financial / material harm: 2%
- Self-harm: 1%
- Sexual harm: 1%

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[30] There were 1,148 missing incidents relating to 978 missing adults. 25 records were also shared with us where the police record did not specifically record that the person had come to harm. Of those 25, we found no evidence of harm having been experienced in those episodes.

Type of harm in records where any harm was identified

The below chart shows the prevalence of harm within those records where harm was identified.

As the chart shows, the two main types of harm identified are suicide-related harm and physical harm. Physical harm suggests that the person may have been a victim of crime, and suicide-related harm demonstrates a clear risk to life. Therefore, in the majority of cases where someone comes to harm while away there is a need for police intervention, either linked to crime or the protection of the person who has gone missing.

Types of harm identified for those records where any harm was present
(Missing People records n. 65; Police records n. 82)
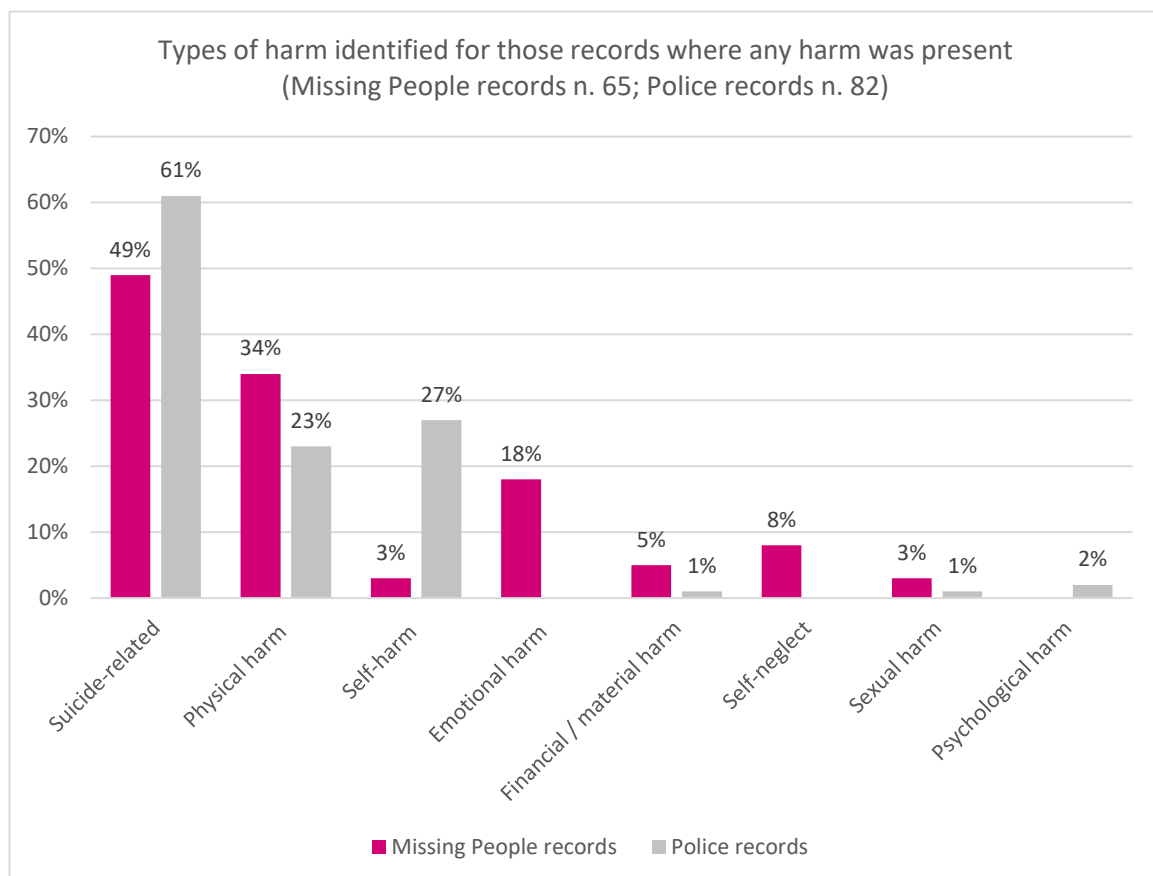
Suicide and self-harm

Suicide-related harm was the most commonly identified harm in both Missing People and police records. This harm covers attempts made by people to take their own life as well as suicidal intentions or thoughts while away.

In Missing People records the most common suicide related harm was experiencing suicidal thoughts or intention while away (32 of 65 records), whereas in police records over half of those known to have come to harm while away had actually tried to take their own life (44 of 82 records). This discrepancy may be due to the higher level of detail contained in police records, including details shared in Safe and Well checks when the person returns.

In a high proportion of cases the person was known to have attempted to take their own life in the past or had had past suicidal thoughts. In 66% of Missing People cases where the person suffered suicide related harm while away, they were known or suspected of attempting to take their own life or having suicidal thoughts in the past (21 of 32 cases).

In police records, where someone had attempted to take their own life while missing, in 80% of cases they had either made a recent attempt to take their own life or had had recent suicidal thoughts / evidence of suicidal intention (35 of 44 cases). Where people had experienced suicidal thoughts or intentions while away, in 67% of cases they had also recently experienced these thoughts

Survey findings

- Over half of missing adults said that they had *'thought about taking your life, but did not try to do so'* while missing; 51% (32 of 63)
- 4 in 10 had *'made an attempt or attempts to take your own life'* while missing; 41% (26 of 63)

or had attempted to take their own life (4 of 6 cases).

Police records also demonstrated a high prevalence of self-harm while away: in over 1 in 4 cases the person had self-harmed while away (22 of 82 cases).

There was stronger evidence of self-harm in the survey than was shown in both Missing People and police records, with nearly half of those completing the survey saying that they *'deliberately harmed yourself in any way but not with the intention of taking your own life'*; 49% (31 of 63). Current NCA statistics estimate that 4% of missing incidents in England and Wales result in self-harm. This survey data suggests that this is likely to be an under-estimate, perhaps a sizeable one.

In many of the cases reviewed the person had gone missing in circumstances that clearly suggested that they might take their own life, and this was reported to the police when the person was reported missing.

This might have been because the person went away having left a note, told someone something suggesting they were going to try

Case study

Ashley* was in hospital after having threatened to take her own life. She left the hospital without being assessed by the mental health team.

She then sent a text to her sister telling her that she'd "had enough" and that she was going to take an overdose. She was found by the police having drunk some whisky and taken an overdose of paracetamol. She was taken to hospital.

to take their own life, or sent a text, or posted something on social media. It might also have been because the person was known to be at risk of suicide because of what was happening in their life at the time.

The records show very complex and difficult situations for many people reported missing and subsequently attempting to take their own life or with suicidal intentions. Examples include people experiencing mental health crisis and going missing from hospital, people who have been experiencing difficulties at home and at work, or in their relationships with friends and family.

In many cases there was a record of the person having attempted to overdose by taking a high number of pills, and in some cases the person had also consumed a large amount of alcohol. In a small number of cases the suicide attempt was through other means.

In a small number of cases the person had been reported missing a number of times in quite quick succession and had ultimately gone missing and attempted to take their own life.

Physical harm

In Missing People records, nearly 1 in 3 of those who had suffered harm were known or suspected of suffering physical harm. [31]

This is also seen in police records, where almost 1 in 4 of those who came to harm suffered from physical harm while they were away.[32]

In some cases the record specified some detail about the physical harm but not about how it happened. For example, records referenced people returning with injuries thought to be from assaults, bleeding noses, a black eye, cuts, and bruises.

In other cases the reason for the physical harm was specified. Examples of these cases included people falling over, people experiencing assaults, and a case in which someone was hit by a car. While these records often did not include enough detail to say whether the person was a victim of crime, any physical harm inflicted by someone else should be treated as such.

Case study

Jason* was reported missing after not returning home from work. A few months earlier he had cut his wrists and attempted to take his own life. He has some issues with drugs and alcohol and has recently suffered a bereavement. He is in the middle of a relationship breakdown. There are concerns that he will have used public transport to travel away from his home.

He later returns home looking dishevelled and with bruises, although he does not want to tell the police what happened while he was away.

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[31] In terms of other types of harm; in Missing People records (n. 199) 12 people were known or suspected to have suffered emotional harm; 5 suffered harm through self-neglect; 3 suffered financial or material harm; and 2 from sexual harm. For police records (n. 82); 2 people came to or were suspected of coming to psychological harm; 1 was suspected of coming to sexual harm, and 1 came to financial / material harm.
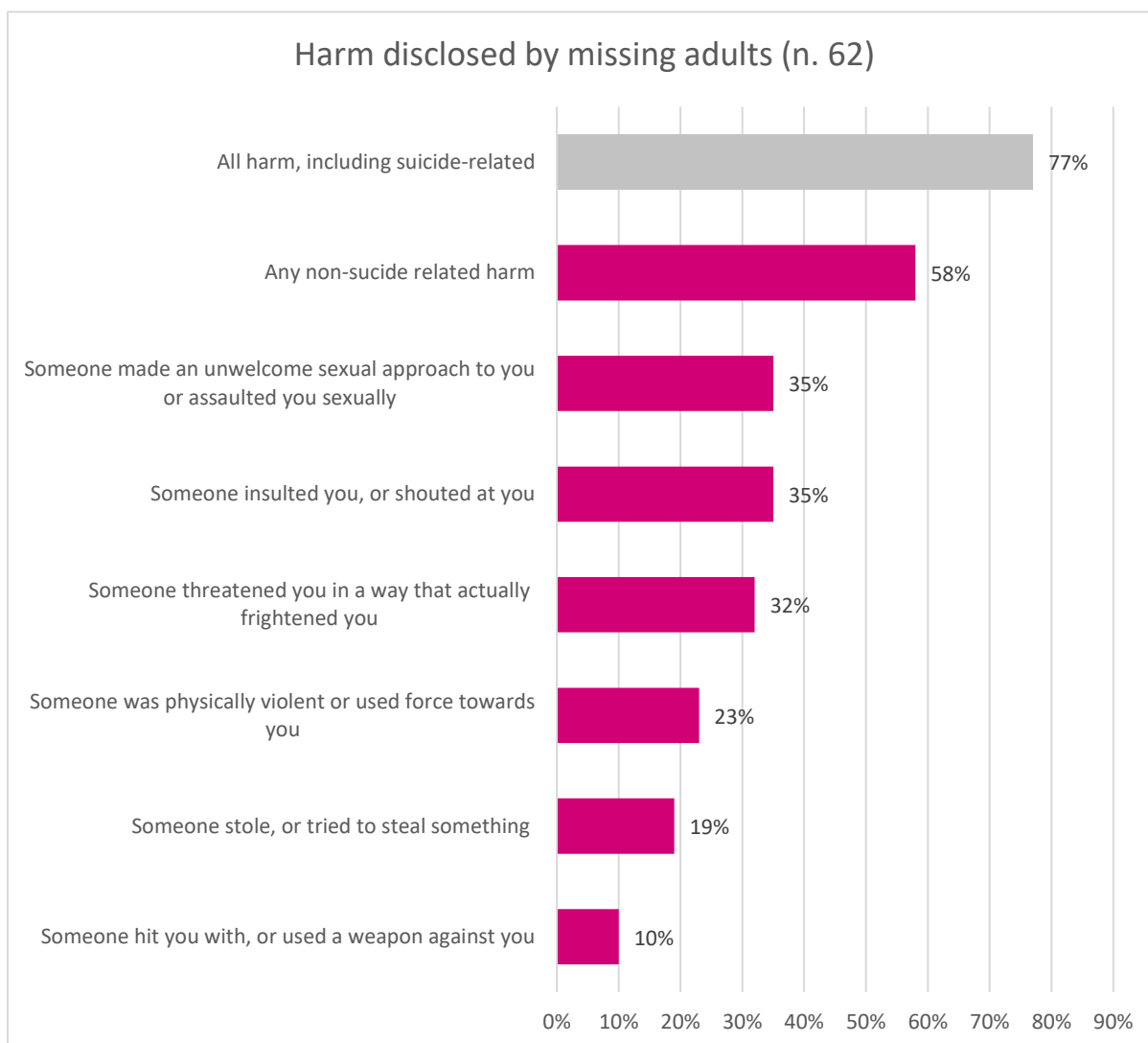[32] 19 of 82; 23%.

Harm disclosed by adults in the survey

Almost 60% of the adults who responded to the survey (36 of 62) had experienced some form of harm not linked to suicide while missing or away. Considering suicide related harm and other types of harm, 77% of adults disclosed experiencing harm while away (49 of 64).

The categories used in the survey are not exactly the same as those used in coding and analysis of the records, but the question attempted to explore the scale of harms using similar 'themes' to the coding of the records.

77% of adults completing the survey experienced harm while away (49 of 64)

The survey responses demonstrate the significant and varied harms experienced by adults when missing. While nearly 60% of survey respondents had experienced at least one of these non-suicide related harms, 1 in 6 had experienced three or more. Over 1 in 3 (22 of 62) adults experienced someone insulting them or shouting at them, and over 1 in 3 (22 of 62) experienced an unwelcome sexual approach or were assaulted sexually.

Harm disclosed by missing adults (n. 62)

| Category	Percentage
All harm, including suicide-related	77%
Any non-sucide related harm	58%
Someone made an unwelcome sexual approach to you or assaulted you sexually	35%
Someone insulted you, or shouted at you	35%
Someone threatened you in a way that actually frightened you	32%
Someone was physically violent or used force towards you	23%
Someone stole, or tried to steal something	19%
Someone hit you with, or used a weapon against you	10%

The prevalence of sexual harm is much higher here than in either Missing People or police records, suggesting that this is not often disclosed in a way that would be included in missing person reports.

The survey findings show clear links between going missing and being a victim of crime:

- **Over 1 in 3 experienced an unwelcome sexual approach or were assaulted sexually**
- **Nearly 1 in 4 experienced physical violence or force**

Nearly 1 in 3 (20 of 62) adults experienced being threatened and scared by someone, and nearly 1 in 4 (14 of 62) experienced physical violence or force. Again, these are at a much higher prevalence than in the records reviewed, and in existing NCA statistics on the harm experienced by missing adults. Nearly 1 in 5 (12 of 62) had something stolen or an attempt at something being stolen, and 1 in 10 (6 of 62) had a weapon used against them. There are clear links here between going missing and being a victim of crime, particularly in terms of sexual harm and experiencing physical violence or force.

The survey of missing adults also asked whether they had experienced any of the following while missing or away:
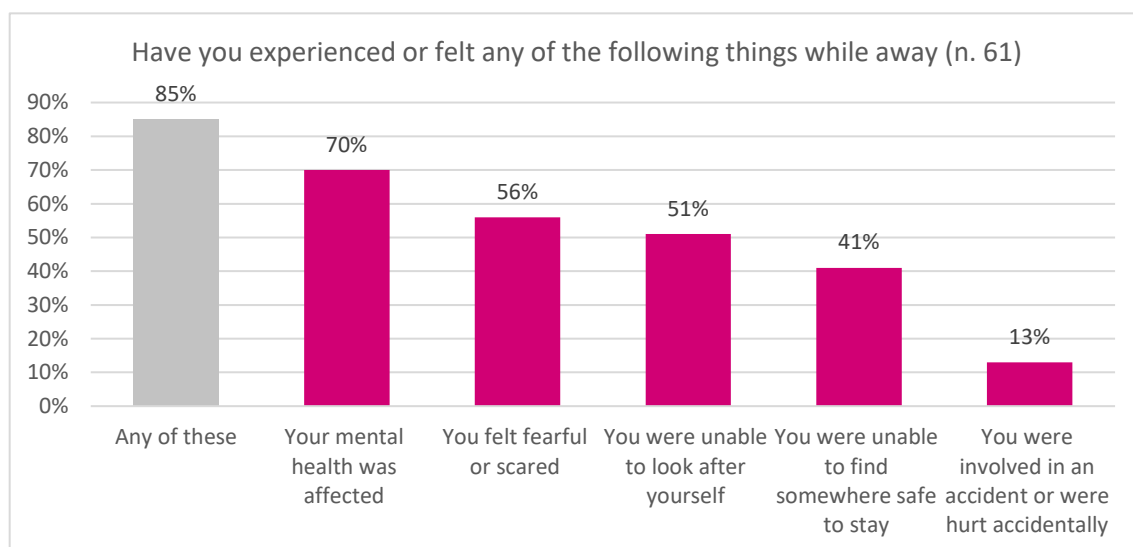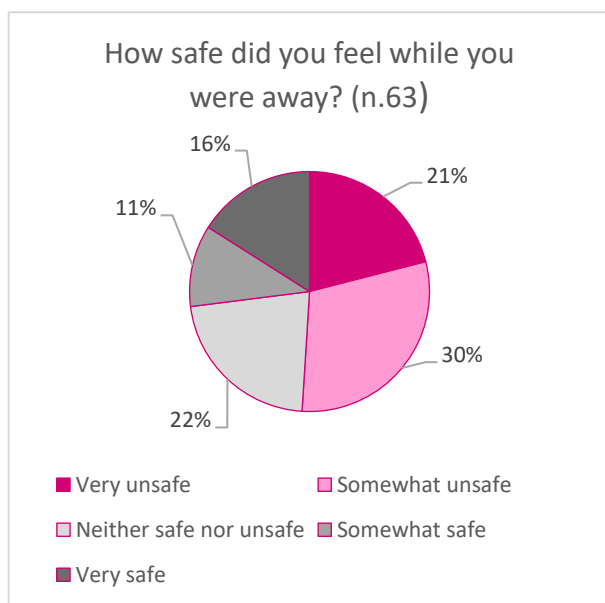

The vast majority of people who responded to the survey had experienced at least one of these things, with 40% of respondents experiencing three or more. Only 15% of those completing the survey had experienced none of these things while they were missing. The nature and scale of harms being experienced by adults, as disclosed by adults completing the survey, and as demonstrated in the records review, is much higher than that currently evidenced through the NCA statistics. And while suicide and self-harm are the most commonly being experienced in both the survey and the record review, the range of harms, and the fact that many people are experiencing more than one of these things demonstrates the often harmful, dangerous and scary situations adults often face while away.

Feeling unsafe while missing[33]

> *Over half of missing adults who responded to the survey felt very or somewhat unsafe while they were missing.*

In the survey with missing adults their experiences while they were missing was explored in more detail.

Adults who had been missing were asked about their safety, and how safe or unsafe they felt while they were missing or away:

How safe did you feel while you were away? (n.63)

- Very unsafe: 21%
- Somewhat unsafe: 30%
- Neither safe nor unsafe: 22%
- Somewhat safe: 11%
- Very safe: 16%

Slightly over half said that they felt either 'very' or 'somewhat' unsafe: 32 of 63. Slightly more than a quarter said they felt either 'very' or 'somewhat' safe (17 of 63), with the remainder saying they felt neither safe nor unsafe.

People who said they had felt unsafe were asked why. The reasons ranged from feeling unsafe because of themselves, to being scared because of other people, or being scared because of where they went while they were missing.

Unsafe due to their own thoughts or actions

Those who felt unsafe because of themselves spoke of being scared of their own thoughts or actions, including fear around feeling suicidal.

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

- *"Couldn't control how I was feeling and knew no one was really actually looking for me"*

Unsafe due to other people

Those who felt unsafe because of other people were scared for their own physical safety as well as for their possessions. Being scared of losing possessions appeared to be particularly the case for people who had slept rough or been homeless while missing.

- *"Sleeping out, not knowing who was around. Always worrying I was going to find my stuff stolen when I got back to the camp, or the tent and stuff trashed by kids or something. You only take what you really need so losing anything can have consequences."*

- *"When I was on the streets I 'slept' rough on a park bench. But I was always too scared to sleep because you hear the horror stories. It was a park known for anti-social behaviour."*

Unsafe because of where they were staying

A number of people spoke about feeling unsafe linked to where they were staying

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[33] The quotes used are verbatim. The use of square brackets shows either where text was removed or changed: this has been done either to protect the anonymity of the person or to shorten the quote without changing the meaning of the quote.

while they were missing. Where this was referenced, it was mainly in relation to staying in cars or hostels where the person did not feel safe.

- *"Staying in a run down hotel in a deprived area. There were no curtains in the bathroom and I was afraid of the other guests."*

- *"Sleeping in my car at night, people would walk past and anything could have happened to me. Walking alone in the dark was also scary."*

Other reasons for feeling unsafe

Some people spoke about feeling unsafe for multiple reasons relating to why they were missing in the first place, some linked to harm they had experienced in the past. Others spoke about feeling unsafe due to reasons not directly linked to the missing episode, but linked to what else was happening in their life:

- *"I felt suicidal, I was scared I'd get raped again or someone would do something. It was dark and I didn't know where I was or who to go to for help"*

- *"Not knowing where I would be in an hours time. Worried about sexual assault. Worried about drunks attacking me."*

- *"My relationship, my debt, my life at the time."*

- *"Other people. Previous experience of sexual exploitation [...] I often don't have the ability to call for help. I have physical health issues [...] I wouldn't have been able to get help if I needed it."*

A couple of people mentioned feeling fear linked to professionals who might be involved in looking for them or in their care more

generally. This was both in relation to what would happen when they were found and while they were missing:

- *"[...] How I'd be treated by police / mental health professionals / parents if I was found"*

- *"Feeling like I was being hunted by the police"*

Support needs while away

Currently there is limited support for missing adults when they are missing or when they return from being missing. There is also very little information about the types of support adults need while missing, and how they try to access help when needed.

For this research adults were asked if they tried to access help while they were away:

While you missing or away, did you access any support services or try to get help? (n. 63)

8% 8%
19%
65%

■ Yes
□ I tried to but was unable to
□ No
□ I can't remember / prefer not to say
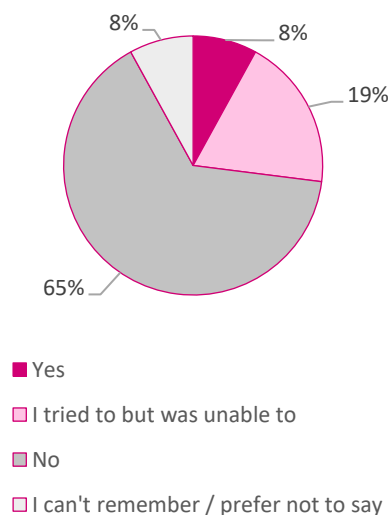
The majority of those responding to the survey did not try to access support or help while away (65%, or 41 of 63 adults). Only 5

people (8%) were able to access help, while another 12 (19%) tried to get help but were unable to. Only a small number of people shared information about where they had sought help from: these included the NHS, The Samaritans, Missing People, another charity, and the police.

Publicity

The police, families, and the charity Missing People regularly use publicity appeals to help to find missing people. This tends to be a poster of the missing person, including their photo and some information about where and when they went missing, with the aim of finding that person more quickly or of enabling them to access help. Publicity might be shared on social media, in local areas, or privately with people who may come into contact with the person. A third of those responding to Missing People's survey knew that publicity had been used when they were missing (34%; 21 of 62).

For the majority of those whose missing episode had involved publicity, the use of publicity was negative for them. People spoke of the annoyance that they felt about publicity, saying that they:

- *"Just wanted to disappear for a while and return in my own time",* and *"getting away was a choice I made."*

Others spoke of the negative experiences they had because people in their life suddenly knew what was happening to them;

- *"It was the most awful thing. Having EVERYONE know what was going on,*

including people I haven't seen in years was the worst thing ever to come back to."

Linked to this, some spoke of the discomfort in strangers recognising them:

- *"It was awful. My face being plastered everywhere and everyone messaging me, when you go into shops everyone knowing you as that girl that went missing and giving you dirty looks"*

- *"I had to dye my hair because people kept recognising me on the street."*

Some referenced the embarrassment they felt at publicity being used:

- *"Made me feel embarrassed"*

- *"I was absolutely mortified. It was the worst thing that could have happened."*

A long-lasting impact of publicity was highlighted by some as being the fact that their publicity appeal is the first thing that comes up now if their name is googled:

- *"It's also still immortalised online now."[34]*

The strength of feeling about the impact of publicity was clear in some survey responses, as evidenced by this response:

- *"It made things 1000% worse. Horrendous. Really awful to have your name and photo splashed all over a police facebook page. I needed time out and now every person on the planet (literally) could see. When I came back everyone knew which made it much harder to come back at all. I nearly didn't come back at all and it was mainly because of the media appeal."*

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[34] There is information available on Missing People's website about steps that can be taken to try to have information removed from websites: https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/get-help/help-services/publicity/removing-your-digital-footprint

In the survey, missing adults were asked about their views more broadly on publicity:

Which of the following statements come closest to how you felt, or might have felt, on seeing a publicity appeal while you were missing or away? Please check all that apply: (n. 54)	
I was / would be embarrassed	69% (37)
I was / would be angry that I was being looked for	46% (25)
I was / would be worried about long term consequences of publicity	41% (22)
I was / would be pleased that someone was thinking about me	24% (13)
It didn't / wouldn't make much impression	11% (6)
I was / would be relieved that the missing episode might come to an end	9% (5)

Survey responses show that only ¼ said they were or would be pleased that someone was looking for them, and 9% would be relieved that the missing episode might come to an end. However, the majority said that they would be embarrassed, with slightly less than half saying they would be angry and worried about the long-term consequences of publicity.

Publicity can be a helpful tool in trying to find missing people, and in letting them know that they can access support from various places including the Missing People charity. However, these findings also show that it can be harmful to those who have been missing, so consideration should be taken before using publicity, recognising that sometimes publicity

will need to be used in an attempt to avert further harm being experienced by people who are missing.

The Missing People charity has recently changed their approach to publicity, with these findings feeding into the revised approach which significantly limits the number of public appeals. Now public appeals are only available where the missing person's life is thought to be in danger and they are likely not to be able to safeguard themselves, or after 7 days when the potential benefits of public appeals outweigh the risks of public appeals. Before 7 days people can be searched for using the non-public 'Safeguarding Briefing Network' of professionals who may come into contact with the missing person, for example homeless shelters and transport companies.[35]

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[35] To read more about Missing People's new approach to publicity, please see here: https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/police-services/publicity

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.[36] 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

> **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.[37]

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.

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[36] 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.
[37] 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.

Case study

A 76-year-old man was reported missing from home. He was known to have dementia, to be dependent on medication, and to generally be unwell.

Missing People were told that his body had been found, but were not given any information about how he died.

Age and gender of those who died while missing (n. 107)
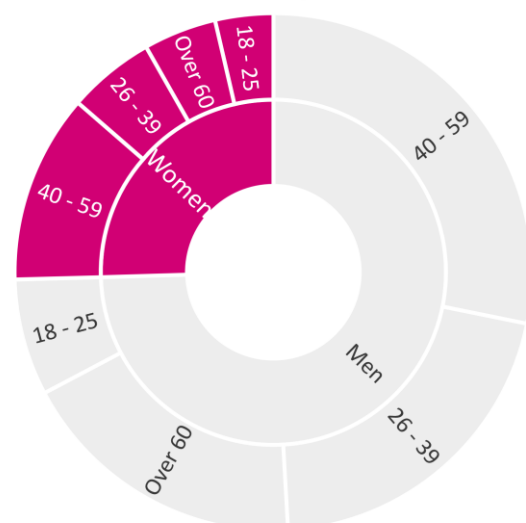
Risks and vulnerabilities being experienced by people who died while missing

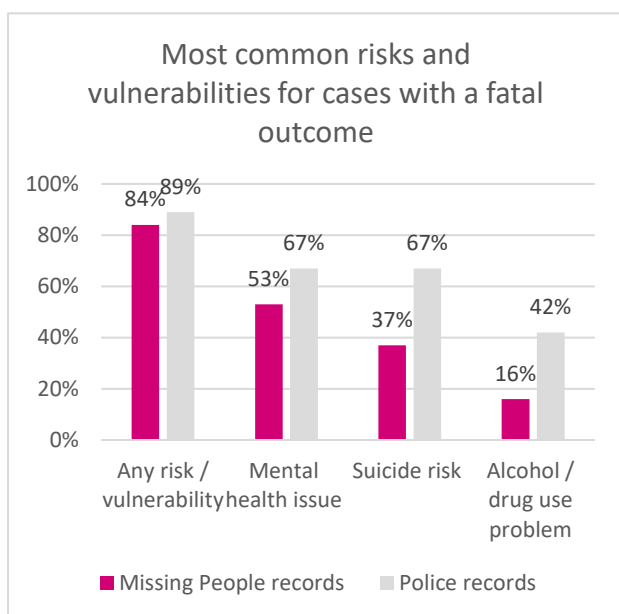In the majority of the cases in which someone died while missing, the person was known or suspected to be experiencing at least one risk or vulnerability. The most commonly identified risks or vulnerabilities being experienced were:

Most common risks and vulnerabilities for cases with a fatal outcome

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.

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.[38] The majority of these cases relate to adults: 2,839 in England & Wales and 507 in Scotland.[39]

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.[40]

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.

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[38] 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."
[39] The age breakdown is not available in Northern Ireland.
[40] 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.

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.

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)

Returning from being missing

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 journey, 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.

Since you have been back, has being missing or away had any effect on your physical or mental health? (n. 61)

Mental health: Yes 66%, No 34%
Physical health: Yes 20%, No 80%

■ Yes ■ No
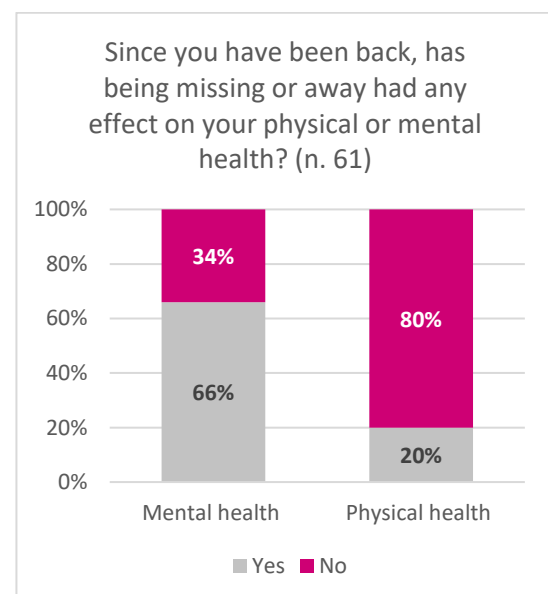
> *"The period immediately after being missing was even worse than the period before in terms of my mental health, even if the reason I had left was due to a crisis. I would find coming home so hard that often it would leave me feeling worse than whatever had made me leave in the first place"*

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 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."*

- *"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:

- *"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 due 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"*

And do you think being missing or away has had any negative or positive impacts on other areas of your life? (n. 60)

Area	Negative impact	Positive impact
My relationships with my family	57%	12%
My own sense of wellbeing	52%	17%
My relationships with my friends	38%	15%
My work or education	37%	10%
My finances	32%	17%
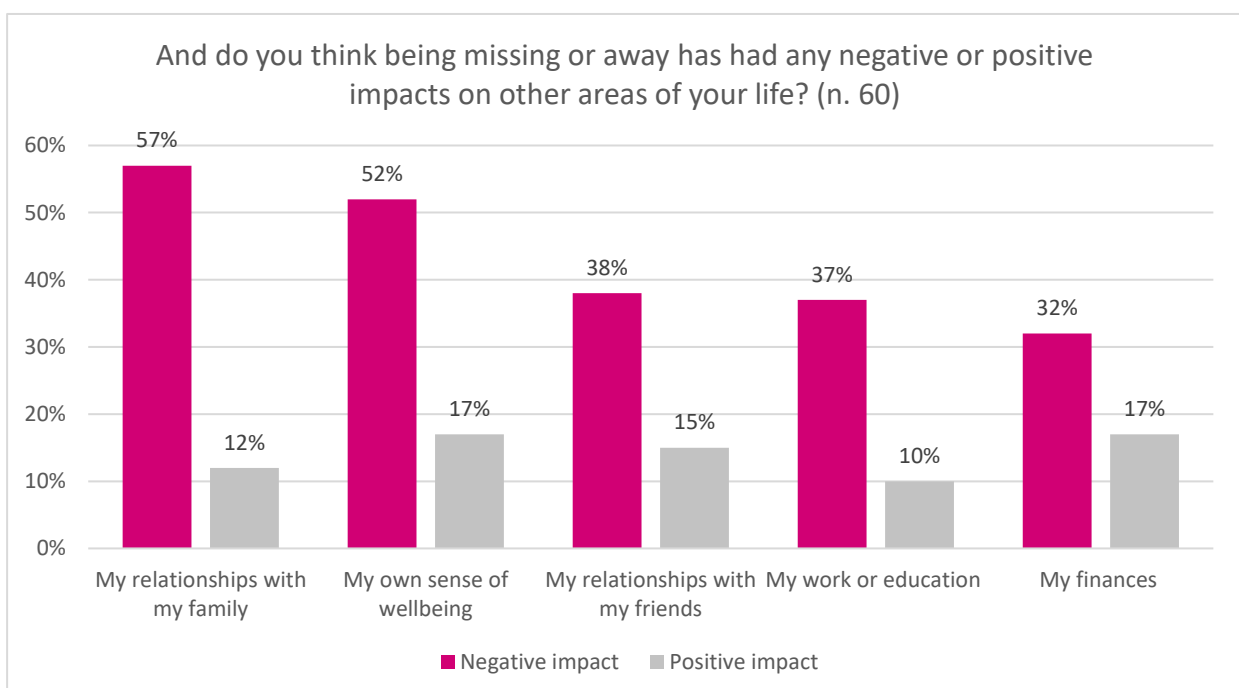
In some responses the complicated situations people are in when they go missing or away were clear, as well as the competing push and pull factors that can be at play:

- *"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 worried, 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.

Conclusion

It is clear from these findings that missing adults are experiencing complex situations, and that they will often go missing in situations where they are at risk of coming to harm while away. The range of factors influencing adults to go missing or away is notable, from mental health, to relationships, to personal safety and concerns around finances. At the same time, the majority of missing adults are experiencing one or more risk factors which may put them at higher risk of harm while missing.

It is clear as well that more missing adults are coming to harm while away than is currently captured in official police statistics. This is particularly evident in the survey responses, where the majority of adults disclosed coming to harm while missing. The response to missing adults must recognise this higher prevalence of harms, particularly the risks of harm around suicide and self-harm. Harm linked to crime was notable in the survey responses, particularly that linked to sexual or physical harm.

Going missing is often a symptom of something that is going on in the person's life, and this research shows that often going missing can exacerbate those things. And while most adults do come back, return should not be seen as the end of the story. Returning from missing should be a clear opportunity for missing adults to get the help that they need. 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.

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.[41]

- 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[42]

- 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.[43]

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[41] 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

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

[4343] 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.[44] 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

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[44] 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'[45]

- 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[46]

- 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

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[45] 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.

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

Appendix A: Missing and harm survey methodology

Studies in which people are asked about their own understandings and experiences of being missing are relatively rare. Researchers more commonly use organisational data such as police records. The lack of studies using data collected at first hand from people who have experience of being missing reflects the fact that missing persons are a 'hard to reach' population for sampling purposes. While researchers have developed a variety of strategies for sampling such populations, many of the standard techniques that have been developed to sample the hard to reach are not suitable for studying missing persons.

Frequently, missing persons are in effect invisible. While their identity might be known, by definition their whereabouts are not, making them inaccessible to research while missing. The need therefore is to study 'returned missing.' Some missing persons are never found, however, or are found deceased. Moreover, people reported as missing do not always consider themselves to have been so or might be unaware that they have been reported missing.

Techniques for contacting 'hard to reach' groups are not necessarily suitable for missing people. 'Snowballing,' identifying an initial member of the group of interest and using their contacts to identify and contact further members, is not appropriate as missing persons cannot be said to be a form of subculture, and might have no particular basis for interacting with one another. Locational strategies, where members of the group are approached at a place where they frequent, is unlikely to identify sufficiently large numbers of missing people.

One approach that is more suitable for reaching missing people is the use of online social networks. Although it is conceivable that people change their use of social media after they go missing, no reliable information exists about the social media preferences of missing people or their families. For this research it was therefore decided to use Facebook advertising as a recruitment method. Facebook advertisements were placed at a variety of locations and run over a number of weeks. These advertisements directed potential respondents to the survey which was hosted on the SmartSurvey website.

In all 90 survey responses were obtained. However, 26 of the people who started the survey said they had never in fact been missing or were not prepared to disclose whether they had been missing, so these individuals were removed from the dataset. Responses were inspected carefully, and there was no evidence of 'bots' or suspicious activity.

The sample was predominantly White, female, and young. Excluding those who provided no information, almost three-quarters (73%) of those who responded to the survey gave their gender as female. Around 18% were male, while 4% described themselves as transgender males, and 6% identified with a variety of gender non-conforming roles. Ethnicity was classified using the Census categories. Over four-fifths (85%) of respondents described themselves as White. Those categorised as belonging to 'Mixed or Multiple Ethnic Groups' or as 'Asian or Asian British' each accounted for 3% respectively, while 9% were classified as 'Other'. Fifty per-cent of the sample was aged between 18 and 24, while those aged between 45 and 54 accounted for a fifth of respondents, and those in the 25-34 and in the 35-45 age-groups were in each case slightly over 10% (12% and 13% respectively).

It is somewhat difficult to make comparisons with police data on missing persons because of differing definitions and geographic areas. Data for England and Wales published by the UK Missing

Persons Unit suggest that missing adults are more likely to be men than women and to fall into the 18-39 age bracket. In terms of ethnicity (or more accurately ethnic appearance) Black adults are over-represented in the police data compared to their numbers in the population.

Appendix B: full responses to the survey questions about influences in going missing / away

You've told us that your feelings or mental health influenced your decision to leave, which of the following, if any, were you experiencing at that time? Please select all that apply: (N. 59)	
I was feeling that I couldn't cope	85% (50)
I just wanted to get away	80% (47)
I was depressed	71% (42)
I was feeling suicidal	64% (38)
I felt I couldn't share my feelings with anyone	61% (36)
I couldn't get any support for the feelings I was having	58% (34)
I was self-harming	47% (28)
I was experiencing another mental health issue	36% (21)
I felt I needed a fresh start	31% (18)
I was using drugs	20% (12)
I was drinking heavily	15% (9)

You've told us that your relationships with others influenced your decision to leave, which of the following, if any, were you experiencing at that time? Please select all that apply: (n. 52)	
The relationship I had with someone had broken down or was breaking down	65% (34)
I had argued with someone close to me	50% (26)
I was annoyed with other members of my family	42% (22)
I was being bullied / discriminated against	37% (19)
I was worried about someone else in my family	12% (6)

You've told us that where you were staying influenced your decision to leave, which of the following, if any, were you experiencing at that time? Please select all that apply: (n. 43)	
I was unhappy there	77% (33)
I was finding it difficult to get on with other people who were there	58% (25)
I was lonely there	44% (19)
I felt unsafe there	40% (17)

I was unhappy with the care I was receiving there	30% (13)
I was being bullied / discriminated against	30% (13)

You've told us that your personal safety influenced your decision to leave. Which of the following, if any, were you experiencing at that time? Please select all that apply: (n. 33)	
I did not feel safe where I was staying	61% (20)
I was being emotionally bullied by someone	58% (19)
I was in an abusive relationship with someone	42% (14)
I was being threatened by someone	30% (10)
I was being physically harmed by someone	27% (9)
I was being held against my will	21% (7)

You've told us that your financial situation influenced your decision to leave, which of the following, if any, were you experiencing at that time? Please select all that apply: (n. 25)	
I had trouble making ends meet	76% (19)
I had a lot of debt	44% (11)
I had lost my job	16% (4)
Someone else in my household had lost their job	12% (3)
I was gambling heavily	4% (1)

Appendix C: Coding of harm more detailed information

Types of harm

We developed the following harms in relation to this research:

Suicide (death by suicide, suicide attempt, suicide attempt or suicide intention / thoughts)
Other fatal harm
Self-harm
Self-neglect
Physical harm
Emotional or psychological harm
Sexual harm
Financial / material harm
Other harm

Identification of harm

In order to accurately reflect the types of harm, and what the records tell us about that harm, the following categories were coded where harm had been identified or suspected:

Yes
Suspected
No (confirmed)
Blank – where there was no record of that type of harm occurring, but no record that it had not occurred

The source of the identification of harm was also specified where possible. This is to ensure that the analysis is able to differentiate where the harm has been explicitly disclosed, and where it has been suspected or, in some cases, assumed. For that purpose, the following list of possible identifying people was developed:

Missing person
Police
Family member
Friend
Other professional
Missing People team services when reviewing the case
Inferred by Missing People research team from case notes
Other [specify]
Police AND Family
Other multiple [specify]

Appendix D: risks and vulnerabilities

The following tables show the risks and vulnerabilities identified by case type for Missing People and police force records.

Risks and vulnerabilities identified in Missing People records						
	Missing People fatal outcome cases (n.89)		Missing People found cases (n. 199)		Missing People still missing cases (n. 137)	
Mental health issue	47	52.8%	112	56.3%	43	31.4%
Suicide risk	33	37.1%	44	22.1%	12	8.8%
Left without adequate provisions (e.g., phone or money)	19	21.3%	34	17.1%	17	12.4%
Social isolation	15	16.9%	13	6.5%	13	9.5%
Alcohol / drug use problem	14	15.7%	30	15.1%	11	8.0%
Financial pressures / worries	8	9.0%	15	7.5%	6	4.4%

Relationship breakdown	8	9.0%	10	5.0%	1	0.7%
Physical health condition	7	7.9%	36	18.1%	10	7.3%
Chaotic home	6	6.7%	13	6.5%	5	3.6%
Dementia	6	6.7%	32	16.1%	0	0.0%
Other	6	6.7%	32	16.1%	28	20.4%
Self-harm	6	6.7%	14	7.0%	4	2.9%
Bereavement / loss	5	5.6%	5	2.5%	6	4.4%
Homelessness	5	5.6%	37	18.6%	18	13.1%
Medication needs at risk of not being met - mental health	5	5.6%	23	11.6%	6	4.4%
Medication needs at risk of not being met - physical health	5	5.6%	12	6.0%	3	2.2%
Criminal activity	4	4.5%	10	5.0%	4	2.9%
Physical disability	3	3.4%	12	6.0%	4	2.9%
Bullying	2	2.2%	6	3.0%	2	1.5%
Discrimination	2	2.2%	2	1.0%	0	0.0%
Exploitation - Criminal	2	2.2%	5	2.5%	0	0.0%
Abuse - history of	1	1.1%	10	5.0%	11	8.0%
Addiction - other	1	1.1%	3	1.5%	1	0.7%
Autism / ASC / Asperger's	1	1.1%	7	3.5%	1	0.7%
Domestic abuse - victim	1	1.1%	7	3.5%	4	2.9%
Domestic abuse - witness	1	1.1%	2	1.0%	0	0.0%
Exploitation - Other	1	1.1%	1	0.5%	5	3.6%
Exploitation - Sexual	1	1.1%	6	3.0%	4	2.9%
Learning disability	1	1.1%	13	6.5%	2	1.5%
Low self-esteem	1	1.1%	4	2.0%	0	0.0%
Pregnant	1	1.1%	3	1.5%	1	0.7%
Stalking victim	1	1.1%	1	0.5%	0	0.0%
Work-based issues	1	1.1%	5	2.5%	0	0.0%

Risks and vulnerabilities identified in Police force records						
	Fatal outcome cases (n. 18)		Non-fatal harm cases (n. 82)		No harm cases (n. 25)	
Mental health issue	12	66.7%	69	84.1%	17	68.0%
Suicide risk	12	66.7%	64	78.0%	12	48.0%
Alcohol / drug use problem	6	33.3%	34	41.5%	13	52.0%
Bereavement / loss	4	22.2%	5	6.1%	1	4.0%
Self-harm	4	22.2%	25	30.5%	3	12.0%
Criminal activity	3	16.7%	13	15.9%	2	8.0%
Medication needs at risk of not being met - mental health	3	16.7%	2	2.4%	6	24.0%
Relationship breakdown	3	16.7%	27	32.9%	8	32.0%
Addiction - other	2	11.1%	1	1.2%	0	0.0%
Autism / ASC / Asperger's	2	11.1%	1	1.2%	1	4.0%
Domestic abuse - victim	2	11.1%	1	1.2%	3	12.0%

Financial pressures / worries	2	11.1%	12	14.6%	7	28.0%
Other	2	11.1%	17	20.7%	8	32.0%
Physical health condition	2	11.1%	12	14.6%	4	16.0%
Abuse - history of	1	5.6%	1	1.2%	1	4.0%
Bullying	1	5.6%	1	1.2%	1	4.0%
Dementia	1	5.6%	1	1.2%	0	0.0%
Exploitation - Other	1	5.6%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Exploitation - Sexual	1	5.6%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Social isolation	1	5.6%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Work-based issues	1	5.6%	10	12.2%	5	20.0%
Chaotic home	0	0.0%	2	2.4%	6	24.0%
Discrimination	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Domestic abuse - witness	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Exploitation - Criminal	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Homelessness	0	0.0%	5	6.1%	3	12.0%
Learning disability	0	0.0%	2	2.4%	2	8.0%
Low self-esteem	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Medication needs at risk of not being met - physical health	0	0.0%	7	8.5%	3	12.0%
Physical disability	0	0.0%	2	2.4%	0	0.0%
Pregnant	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Stalking victim	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%

Appendix E: Prevalence of harm in Missing People and police records

Historic harm				
Type of harm	Fatal outcome cases (Missing People): n. 89	Fatal outcome cases (police records): n. 18	Found / returned (Missing People): n. 199	Still missing (Missing People): n. 137
ANY HARM	30% (26)	39% (7)	30% (59)	17% (23)
Suicide-related[47]	21% (19)	39% (7)	13% (26)	5% (7)
Self-harm	6% (5)	11% (2)	6% (11)	1% (2)
Physical harm	1% (1)		9% (18)	3% (4)
Emotional harm	2% (2)		5% (9)	1% (1)
Self-neglect	2% (2)		4% (7)	1% (1)
Financial / material harm			4% (7)	
Sexual harm			2% (4)	
Psychological harm			1% (2)	

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[47] Known to have attempted suicide in the past; suicidal thoughts / intention in the past; suspected suicide attempt in the past

Harm just before / as a trigger for going missing				
Type of harm	Fatal outcome cases (Missing People): n. 89	Fatal outcome cases (police records): n. 18	Found / returned (Missing People): n. 199	Still missing (Missing People): n. 137
ANY HARM	26% (23)	56% (10)	18% (35)	8% (11)
Suicide-related	15% (13)	56% (10)	10% (19)	3% (4)
Self-harm	2% (2)		2% (3)	
Physical harm	2% (2)	6% (1)	1% (1)	
Emotional harm	3% (3)	6% (1)	3% (5)	1% (2)
Self-neglect			1% (2)	
Financial / material harm			2% (3)	2% (3)
Sexual harm				
Psychological harm	2% (2)			
Other harm			3% (5)	1% (2)

Harm while missing			
Type of harm	Fatal outcome cases (Missing People): n. 89	Fatal outcome cases (police records): n. 18	Found / returned (Missing People): n. 199
ANY HARM	100% (89)	100% (18)	33% (65)
Confirmed or suspected death by suicide	58% (52)	67% (12)	
Other fatal harm	42% (37)	33% (6)	
Suicide-related			16% (32)
Self-harm			1% (2)
Physical harm	1% (1)	6% (1)	11% (22)
Emotional harm	4% (4)		6% (12)
Self-neglect	4% (4)		3% (5)
Financial / material harm	3% (3)		2% (3)
Sexual harm			1% (2)
Psychological harm		6% (1)	

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