“We’re told not to make everything about race, but it is about race.”

The experiences of Black missing children and their parents

July 2024

LISTEN UP

missing people

Registered charity in England and Wales (1020419) and in Scotland (SC047419)

About Listen Up

Listen Up is a national research and training organisation established to amplify the experiences of Black and racialised children in child protection research, policy and practice. It is the leading organisation increasing awareness about adultification bias and its implications for child protection.

https://www.listenupresearch.org

About Missing People

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, those who are 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 www.missingpeople.org.uk/forprofessionals/information-and-policy/informationand-research.

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Acknowledgments

We would like to thank all of those who gave up their time and shared so generously with us their experiences with such honesty and openness, as well as the organisations that supported the research by engaging with people they support. Particular thanks go to colleagues at Catch22, Safer London, Afruca and Abianda. This research is the continuation of work being done across various organisations and sectors to try to improve the experiences of and responses to missing Black people and their families, and we hope this is one step closer to creating meaningful change.

Introduction and background

Black children are disproportionately likely to go missing, with 16% of all missing children being Black compared to only 6% of the general population. Given that going missing is often a warning sign of crisis or an indicator of serious harm, this massive over-representation suggests that Black children face disproportionately high risks.

These statistics are not new, there have been records of over-representation for many years. However, little has been done to understand why Black children are going missing, and what support is needed to prevent this in the future.

The Ethnicity of Missing People research, published in 2023, revealed a series of disparities in missing incidents depending on the missing person's race: Black children are more likely to stay missing for longer, less likely to be identified as vulnerable due to exploitation or mental health issues, and less likely to be found by the police than White children. The report's findings were stark but did little to explain why these disparities are happening, why Black children are more likely to go missing, and what support is needed for those who are at risk of going missing, or who have been missing and returned.

While there is still limited research, there is an increasing acknowledgement that there needs to be greater focus on Black missing people, and better support put in place. MissingBlackPeople.com was founded in 2021 to put a greater spotlight on publicity appeals for Black missing people which had otherwise often been overlooked; the Department for Education has begun publishing ethnicity data in their statistics about missing Looked After Children, allowing for better scrutiny of any disparities in the experiences or safeguarding of children from ethnic minorities; and the Police Race Action Plan explicitly includes an aim to "Improve the police response and effectiveness in supporting missing persons from Black communities."

However, too little has been heard directly from people with lived experience. It is vital that the voices of people who have been missing, or who have had a loved one go missing, are directly informing changes in policy and frontline practice. This research aims to centre Black children and young people's voices and experiences, to help in better understanding the risks that are driving Black young people to go missing, and the response they are receiving from professionals.

Throughout this research report we will refer to Black children, young people and families. However, Black experiences are not homogenous and the participants we spoke to are from diverse backgrounds and communities. We use the word Black in an inclusive sense, including people of Black mixed heritage.

Executive summary

The experiences of the Black young people and parents shared in this report reveal serious harm including exploitation, abuse and criminalisation. It is clear that missing incidents can have far-reaching consequences, including broken relationships, missed opportunities, and lost potential.

Black children and young people are at increased risk and under-supported. Their experiences of racism and indifference are one of many issues which drive them to go missing more often, and to feel uncared for in the response when they are away and return. Parents of Black or mixed-heritage children face additional challenges in accessing fair and supportive responses.

Many of themes we will discuss in this report are not solely experienced by Black missing people and their families. The reasons participants gave as to why Black children go missing were broadly similar to the reasons why all children go missing, and some of the challenges that children and parents experienced in the professional response are also present for people from other ethnic groups. However, a consistent theme throughout our discussions was the impact of race and racism. Even when not explicitly named, these issues surfaced across almost every question and theme, highlighting their pervasive influence on parenting experiences and most importantly on Black children and young people.

Key findings:

1. **Reasons for missing:** Exploitation and conflict or problems at home are common drivers of missing incidents for all children, however, our research found that these risks may be particularly pronounced for Black children. A lack of a sense of belonging or identity was seen to increase vulnerability to going missing.
2. **Lack of value and care:** Black young people consistently reported feeling undervalued compared to their White peers. Poor media representation further exacerbates this issue, as Black missing children receive less attention and care.
3. **Racism:** Racial biases against Black children and their families impact risk assessments and safeguarding responses. Black children are often stereotyped, adultified and criminalised, hindering their access to necessary support.
4. **Trust in Services:** Many Black families lack trust in services, including the police. Firsthand experiences of racism and indifference contribute to this lack of confidence.

Recommendations:

It is difficult to make recommendations on the findings of this research as many of the issues shared by participants reflect experiences of deep, entrenched and systemic racism that we cannot hope to address solely in relation to the response to missing incidents.

However, we do believe that change is possible and vitally important. By putting support in place to prevent missing incidents, by providing the right help, and by challenging inequities in the responses to Black missing children and their families we can genuinely make people safer and rebuild trust with those who have previously been let down.

We asked young people and parents what they would want to see change in the future. The following recommendations are based on their responses. More information about what young people and parents want to see change can be found at the end of the report.

1. Listening to children and young people

It is crucial that the experiences and needs of each individual child are understood by their family and professionals in their life. To do this, children and young people must be meaningfully listened to and given an open, non-judgmental and non-defensive space to share what is happening for them. While responsibility for these conversations lies with everyone who works with children, return interviews provide a specific opportunity for engagement when a child has been missing. All return interview providers should ensure their staff are considerate of and willing to explore the impact of racism as part of wider conversations about a missing incident.

2. Equity and equality

There should be equity for all missing children, regardless of race or ethnicity. This means eradicating any disparities in the response when children go missing, including from police, social care and the media.

3. Better representation in the media

The media plays a key role in some missing person investigations, and in public awareness and perceptions of missing people and the risks they face.

- Media organisations must give equal coverage to reports of Black missing children as they do for White missing children. When reporting on incidents of Black children going missing, they must avoid language and images that perpetuate harmful racial stereotypes, including minimising a child's vulnerability, in any coverage.
- The Independent Press Standards Organisation and Ofcom should hold organisations to account on their reporting and representation of Black missing children. This should include monitoring the language and images they use.

4. Be child-first and child-centred

Professionals within statutory safeguarding partnerships, including the police, social care, education and health, must ensure that every child is understood as an individual. Consideration should be given to mental health issues, emotional wellbeing and neurodiversity. Professionals should avoid making judgements about behaviour, particularly when discrimination or bias may inform those judgements, and instead focus on what may be causing the behaviour, and what support the child may need.

5. Safe spaces for young people

There should be more provision of safe spaces, both physically and in terms of independent support like helplines, for young people to access, allowing them to safely 'get away' from responsibilities or expectations, or to escape harm.

6. Representation matters: a diverse workforce

It is critical that statutory safeguarding partners, including education, have a diverse workforce so that children and young people can get support from someone that they are comfortable with or identify better with. This should include the opportunity to be supported by someone of the same race and ethnicity if that's what the young person wants or needs.

7. Access to support for parents

More support should be provided to parents of missing children. This support needs to be considerate of, and willing to explore, the impact of racism in the parent's experience, and should include options for either, or ideally both:

- Peer support: having access to peer support can be vital, allowing parents to engage with someone who understands what they are going through.
- Nonjudgemental, consistent support from an independent service or individual: this can help parents with their emotional wellbeing, and help them to navigate often complex situations.

8. A whole family approach & better multi-agency working

Professionals, particularly those from police and social care, should take a whole-family approach, seeing parents as protective factors whenever possible, rather than holding negative assumptions or working against them. Agencies should work together and if necessary, challenge instances of discrimination or bias amongst colleagues in their own and partner organisations.

Research background and methodology

Listen Up and Missing People have previously conducted research evidencing that Black people are disproportionately represented in the missing population; are more likely to be missing for longer than other missing people; are less likely to be found by the police; and are less likely to have risk factor vulnerabilities identified in relation to their missing episode. However, there is currently limited research evidencing the lived experience of Black children and their families, and to what extent that reflects the picture shown in the data.

In this research we aim to explore Black children and their families' lived experiences of going missing, to try to better understand:

a) Why are Black children more likely to go missing than other children?
b) Why are Black children more likely to be missing for longer than other children?
c) What response are Black children and families receiving from professionals, and does this differ from the response other children and families receive?

We heard from 34 young people, parents and professionals in this research. Participants were recruited using a variety of methods:

- Missing People reached out to individuals already being supported by, or engaged with, the charity
- We recruited participants via partner agencies, Abianda, Afruca, Catch-22 and Safer London
- A survey was developed and shared on Missing People and Listen Up's social media channels

Parents

7 parents of children who had been missing took part in the research. The parents either self-identified as Black or Black mixed-heritage or as White but identified that their child was Black or Black mixed-heritage.

2 parents took part in semi-structured interviews.

4 parents took part in 2 focus groups.

1 parent completed a survey.

Young people

15 young people took part. Participants self-identified as Black and Black mixed-heritage. 10 of the children had experience of being missing themselves.

5 young people took part in individual interviews and 10 young people took part in two focus groups. These sessions were facilitated by partner agencies.

We use the terms child and young person interchangeably throughout the report. This is to acknowledge that the participants may refer to themselves as young people, while we use the word child intentionally to remind the reader that the findings all relate to the experiences of those who are under-18.

Professionals

12 professionals with experience supporting or working with children who have been missing responded to the survey. 1 of the professionals was also a parent with experience of their child being missing. 8 of the professionals self-identified as Black, mixed race, or Indian. 4 of the professionals self-identified as White.

Research limitations

Exploitation and missing Black children and young people:

The experiences of both young people and parents will be disproportionately characterised by exploitation. This is not a reflection of the wider population, but rather a result of the specific services we used to engage with participants. Whilst we acknowledge that exploitation is an issue that disproportionately impacts Black children and young people, it is important to exercise caution to avoid reinforcing stereotypes or making broad generalisations. This bias is a limitation of our research and should be considered when interpreting findings. Our intention is to highlight these issues, not to stigmatise or stereotype any community.

Sample Size:

Given the small sample size of this study, it is crucial to acknowledge that it does not encompass the diverse experiences of thousands of individuals across various communities. This research is merely an initial step towards understanding some of the experiences, challenges, and barriers that some people from Black communities may be facing.

Research findings

Why Black young people go missing

"Black people are more marginalised therefore they struggle with finding good support systems that they can fully trust" Young person

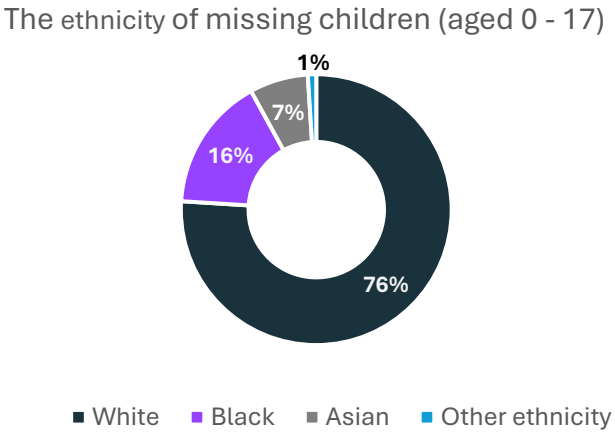
Key findings

- There was no singular reason why people thought Black children are more likely to go missing than children of other ethnicities.
- Some of the reasons identified are common drivers for missing incidents amongst all children; some are unique to Black communities.

The reasons that were identified included:

- Home life, including family conflict, feeling unsafe at home, and feeling financial pressure, including to earn money to contribute towards the family.
- Experiencing a lack of belonging, identity and acceptance, in society, neighbourhoods, and at school.
- Exploitation and risks outside the home, including exploitation and county lines, this was particularly prevalent.

National statistics show that Black children are disproportionately likely to go missing, with Black children representing 16% of all missing people under the age of 18. [1]



However, there is currently little to no research demonstrating why this is the case. For those taking part in this research, people felt it was due to a range of varied reasons, some that are common drivers for missing incidents amongst all children, and some that were unique to those from Black communities.

[1] Missing People and Listen Up, *The Ethnicity of Missing People, findings from police and local authority data, 2021-22,* February 2023: https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Missing_Ethnicity-report.pdf.

Home

Research shows that difficulties at home is one of the main reasons why all children go missing.[2] It is important, therefore, that the following findings are not assumed to be something which only affects Black young people.

However, many of the young people we spoke to shared their experiences or their views that the home environment can play a part in the increased risk of Black children going missing. Therefore, while this can be a factor for all missing children, it is important to note that this research found that it may be particularly pronounced for Black children.

I. Family conflict and pressure

Living in strict households and limited freedom was a reoccurring theme participants spoke about in relation to reasons for going missing:

"Black African parents are quite strict, and so people will rebel!" Young person

"May have stricter parents, they might tell you that you can't do something so you might go missing so you can do this." Young person

"Issues at home, needing a break - cause sometimes small things can mount up, and you know, children don't have another way to get a break if it all gets a bit much." Young person

Some young people spoke specifically about the pressure of academic expectations:

"I think in terms of if someone's chosen to run away, a lot of Black families can have the kind of thing of academic pressure on their children. And that can make a child feel like their worth is equated to their academic success. So that could drive them to leave the home." Young person

Whilst Black young people felt home was at times a strict environment, one parent shared that they were trying to protect their child by putting curfews in place but were instead perceived as being too strict, which in turn pushed their child further away.

"We were being quite strict. And the children that our son got involved with had a different sort of setup at home and their parents weren't strict and so he was constantly, I think comparing in his head what his friends, you know, like what they're kind of like curfews were or whatever with what we were trying to do. And we were just trying to keep him safe. And the more we tried to keep him safe the more he ran away." Parent

[2] Missing People, *Key Statistics about Missing:* https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/for-professionals/policy-and-research/information-and-research/key-information.

Some professionals shared the view that family conflict and pressure may result in Black children going missing:

"Higher levels of family and community pressure/expectation (including a higher degree of caring responsibilities for siblings and elderly relatives) resulting in a greater desire to escape." Professional

"In my experience [...] parents from the Black community are very strict and maybe kids tend to run away more" Professional

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II. Feeling unsafe

Some young people also shared that feeling unsafe at home can be a reason why Black young people go missing:

"They don't feel safe at home." Young person

"Scared of family members." Young person

"They might be frightened of the consequences." Young person

"Also fear of punishment if they've made any kinds of mistakes because it can be seen as quite normal to smack your child if you're a part of like a Black family. And that can make people want to leave their home because they're afraid of telling their family when they've made some kind of mistake. And yeah, so I guess also out of fear of judgment or like extreme punishment." Young person

One professional shared that they felt this may also be linked to domestic abuse:

"Higher prevalence of domestic abuse within the household" Professional

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III. Financial concerns

The pressure to earn money and support the family purse was an issue shared by participants as a potential factor pushing young people towards exploitative situations, which in turn can cause them to go missing. A form of internalised adultification featured in these responses, where young people felt a sense of responsibility to take on adult concerns and to create a better life for their family.

"Sometimes Black homes have more poverty, they do not always have a two-parent household, and so this might lead the person to leave and make money." Young person

"Wanting a better life for their family so are vulnerable" Young person

"I think especially with cost of living there could be low income. That could make a child maybe feel more like a burden, they might leave the house to maybe feel like they're helping family, and maybe have less pressure of an extra person to be taking care of." Young person

Professionals taking part also identified financial concerns as a potential trigger for missing:

"I believe sometimes socioeconomic status of the family is also a contributory factor" Professional

One parent spoke of how their child seemed to feel they needed to take on financial responsibility and support the family, despite it not being necessary. The parent was clear that this was not something they wanted their child to worry about or feel the need to take on, but found it hard to challenge the perception they had built up.

"He started asking me, this was later down the line, things like, how much does the mortgage cost and how much are these? You know, different bills and stuff. And I'm thinking you don't have to worry about any of that because I can do all that I can. I know it's challenging at the moment because I'm now on my own doing it all, but I can actually do it all. And that's nothing for you to worry about..." Parent

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A Lack of belonging, identity and acceptance

Not feeling seen, accepted, and a lack of belonging was a key issue highlighted in the discussions with Black young people and parents. This included concerns about a lack of inclusivity and experiences of racism in wider society. Growing up and going to school in areas which are predominantly populated by White ethnic communities was also seen as a potential contributing factor to going missing due to feelings of isolation.

I. In society and neighbourhoods

A lack of diversity in neighbourhoods and feeling isolated from wider society were issues Black young people and parents felt could negatively impact a sense of belonging and inclusion.

"Black people are more marginalised therefore they struggle with finding good support systems that they can fully trust" Young person

"I think maybe because a lot of Black people that like live in the country, it's probably like the first generation that have lived here... If there's a problem at home for a young Black person, they don't really have anywhere else to go. It could just be like they're family is the

first to move to this country. Or say they do have family here, it might be someone's down south, up north and they don't really have anywhere else to go, but just to go missing."
Young person

One young person felt that intersectional aspects of their identity, such as their sexuality and a lack of representation in society, could further compound the risks of Black young people going missing.

"I think sometimes it's due to sexuality as well. I mean, I'm a lesbian. You just never see that. Like, films always depict a queer White boy. You never see Black people, especially not Black lesbian women." Young person

Some parents expressed concerns about how a lack of belonging can push young people towards unsafe people, including some of their friends.

"We were living in a very multicultural area in [area A] and we moved out into a small village and where my son went to school was in [area B] and it was very White. And that wasn't good in terms of his cultural identity. I think that my son had, and my daughter as well, who's 14, have had kind of like racial bullying and stuff. And at, right at the point when my son started to get into trouble and the exploitation we think started." Parent

"I don't think that Black children are given the space to be themselves in this society, in this culture." Parent

This was also identified by professionals taking part in the research, who mentioned that some Black children may want to travel to meet people they can better identify with, and that the experiences of being Black may compound the risk of going missing:

"Being a minority means you have to travel further to meet up with people 'like you'"
Professional

"Black children may experience circumstances that are layered and may complex further by the experiences of being Black." Professional

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II. At school

While experiencing unhappiness at school is known to be something that can trigger missing episodes for all children, it was evident in this research that Black young people can experience particular and specific challenges in education and within the education system that can exacerbate the risk of them going missing.

While this was not specifically identified by the young people themselves, parents shared that the education system had played a role in the circumstances resulting in their child going missing.

Parents spoke about the lack of inclusivity in schools, misuse of punitive actions, such as internal and external exclusions, and low to no aspiration for Black young people which were all seen as push factors. All of these are indicative of differential treatment due to racism.

"The outcomes for Black children in school, the figures are so disproportionately skewed, and I feel that, you know, if you're feeling let down by an education system. Then the attraction of, you know, being somebody and being involved in something is very, very appealing and when you feel that life is not going well for you." Parent

"They could not manage him either. He was removed off site and taught off site, so that was it for me. That was the gateway to the gangs because he's meeting older kids at the PRU [Pupil Referral Unit] he's catching on to tips and tricks. He's... starting to form behaviours of the people that are around him." Parent

Parents also shared their frustrations about the inclusivity of education settings when a child is Black and neurodiverse.

"You know, neurodiverse people are still treated like shit on the shoe. You know, kids, through schools, isolation rooms, being locked in a room all day long, you know, it's doing nothing but making these children worse. That's what D spent his whole childhood doing, sitting in the naughty room. All connected, isn't it? The whole thing is. Schools, crime, education, young people" Parent

One of the professionals also shared that the education system can play a role in Black children going missing:

"Increased likelihood of school exclusion, constantly being underestimated means you're never pushed or challenged so you get bored of everything around you." Professional

However, one parent felt their child perceived racism in school when it was not necessarily a factor:

"I feel she's she was always inclined to easily call everything racism and that was more to do with her experience as in not being able to fit in in the school setting, and then always feeling like people are picking on her and it could be something very simple, as you know, the teacher said this and they were trying to explain that and she would take it totally out of context and say, oh, this is racism because XYZ." Parent

Exploitation and risks outside of the home

This next section explores some of the issues young people and parents spoke about in relation to exploitation and risks outside the home, and how these could drive missing episodes.

Previous research has found strong links between missing and exploitation, with one study finding that 48% of children who are looked after and identified as being exploited had also been reported missing.[3] Missing episodes can be both key indicators of exploitation and common consequences of exploitation. Previous research has also shown that poverty can be a driver of vulnerability to exploitation,[4] and that exclusions from school are often part of the experience of exploited children.[5] The Lammy Review found that children from Black backgrounds are more likely to experience both, so it is likely that there is disproportionality within Black communities in terms of their experience of exploitation.[6]

The common themes identified in this research include friends, gangs and supposed 'cultural influences'.

Young people themselves rarely spoke about exploitation explicitly, perhaps in part because some young people do not recognise unsafe relationships or exploitative circumstances. However, their comments suggest a vulnerability to grooming and this type of harm.

"A reason why young kids might go missing might be because illegal lifestyles and that get glamourised... like selling drugs. That kind of thing." Young person

"I don't know, cause like some, most Black people, not all of them but some are like in gangs and stuff. And some of them might get like kidnapped or something." Young person

"Friendship influences" Young person

Most of the parents we spoke to talked about their child being exploited and identified a range of factors that contributed to their vulnerability to exploitation. These included Black

[3] Missing People and ECPAT UK, *Away and at risk: the scale of exploited children going missing from care in the UK, 2018-2020,* https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Exploitation-report-FINAL.pdf
[4] *Complexity and challenge: a triennial analysis of SCRs 2014-2017,* Department for Education, 2020, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/869586/TRIENNIAL_SCR_REPORT_2014_to_2017.pdf
[5] *Excluded, exploited, forgotten: Childhood criminal exploitation and school exclusions*, Just for Kids Law, August 2020, https://www.justforkidslaw.org/sites/default/files/fields/download/JfKL%20school%20exclusion%20and%20CCE_2.pdf.
[6] The Lammy review: An independent review into the treatment of, and outcomes for, Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic individuals in the Criminal Justice System, September 2017, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/643001/lammy-review-final-report.pdf

children being more likely to be targeted by groomers, and a lack of belonging making it easier for perpetrators to hold influence over Black children.

"He was going missing because he was being asked to drop off parcels. It was all about, you know, this whole thing around county lines. Never heard of that. I don't even know if that was a word back then. It was afterwards, a good few years afterwards, so, it was all around pretty much child exploitation and I don't have any background in anything like this to do with police, crime, anything. So, for me and my family. I did not have a clue what was going on." Parent

"It kind of feels like I've got my life with my child, which I'm desperately trying to keep going. And then there's this outside street life that he's got going on that I literally have no idea about, that he tries to protect me from and tries to keep me out of. But I know that there is a life going on outside of my home that he is involved in." Parent

"Since he was in year 7. A little, young 11-year-old boy in his brand-new uniform was so excited to be at secondary school, you know, looking spick and span and his hair all nice. And his first few weeks, he was asked to hold drugs for older boys in the school." Parent

"He's looking, he's just looking for somewhere to belong. And his crook friends make him feel like he belongs. And he hasn't had that acceptance in any other, now, even at home, he was a handful. He used to drive his brother crazy. He'd drive me crazy." Parent

"There are cultural needs and cultural differences, and I don't think they're taken into consideration with young Black boys, I don't think young Black boys, I think young Black boys are looked on dismissively." Parent

The experiences of neuro-diverse Black children and young people also featured in some discussions with parents about the risks of exploitation.

"He also, and I think this is part of the neurodiversity, used to watch a lot of drill videos of which glorified gang violence and stuff over and over again." Parent

Previous research has also shown that risks around exploitation are less likely to be identified for Black children compared with White children: in research published in 2023, it was found that only 11% of incidents related to Black children going missing were flagged with a criminal exploitation risk flag, compared to 17% of incidents related to White children. Previous research has also shown that exploited children can receive a criminalising response as opposed to being recognised as victims. It is therefore particularly concerning that young people and parents identified exploitation as a key driver of missing incidents for Black young people. This emphasises the need for

professionals to be able to identify these risks and respond appropriately when there are risks of exploitation.

Mental health

Mental health is amongst the most common reasons why anyone can go missing, but some young people specifically identified this risk for Black children, including challenges in accessing treatment.

"Poor mental health" Young person

"Poor mental or physical health" Young person

"Lack of acknowledgement of mental health issues as well... I think that's another thing that mental health isn't always considered to be something to take care of. Or it would only be approached in a religious aspect of like the child should pray, rather than, like thinking about therapy and other kinds of support as well." Young person

Interrelated and overlapping drivers for going missing

There is no simple answer to why Black children are at increased risk of going missing. This is in part because there will often be multiple reasons that intersect with, and compound one another. Having issues at home or lacking a sense of belonging might increase someone's risk to exploitation, which in turn increases the likelihood of going missing. Being marginalised, or facing discrimination from society, school or other professionals will mean Black children have less places to turn for help, and again could increase the risks of going missing. The accumulative nature of the challenges facing Black young people may in part explain the disproportionality in missing statistics.

Why Black children stay missing for longer than other children

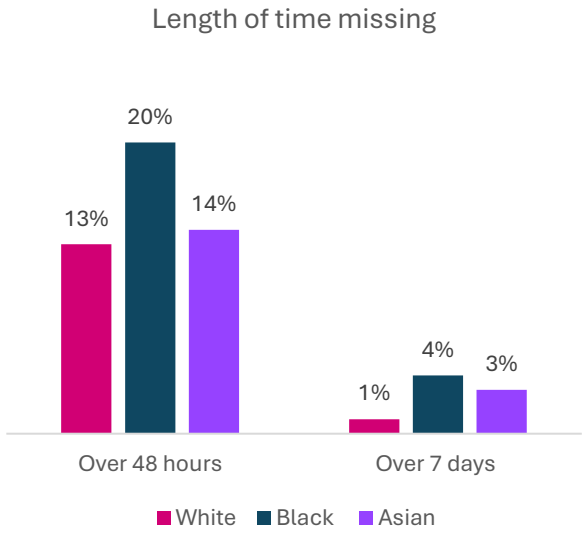
"I think it's like after a certain amount of time that they actually have to do something about it. I think if you report it, and it's not a risk, like a ... threshold they don't like look into it, so not really like an urge for them doing it straight away." Young person

Key findings

- There was no singular reason who Black children may be missing longer than other children.

However, some of the reasons given were:

- A fear of returning home, sometimes linked to safety within the home.
- Exploitation, particularly linked to county lines.
- A delayed safeguarding response from professionals.



Research not only shows that Black children are disproportionately likely to go missing, but also that they stay missing for longer than other children.[7]

This raises serious concerns about the risks and harm they may experience because of being away from home and not receiving help for longer. We asked why young people and parents thought this might be happening. Although there was no single clear answer, themes included children possibly feeling scared to return home, exploitation meaning children were kept away from home for longer periods, or a lack of investigative action meaning Black children are not found as quickly as others.

[7] Missing People and Listen Up, *The Ethnicity of Missing People, findings from police and local authority data, 2021-22,* February 2023: https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Missing_Ethnicity-report.pdf.

Home

A fear of returning home and concerns about a lack of safety within the home were some of the reasons participants provided as to why Black young people go missing for longer periods of time.

"Probably because they fear the consequences and like the punishment they might get if they go back home, which could be like, just not being allowed to go back out in general."
Young person

One participant told us that sometimes a young person might not perceive that they are missing but instead just be removing themselves from a harmful context.

"I think maybe they don't know that they're actually going missing. There's nothing to really make them want to come back home. There's not, if they're not happy at home, or there's not good foundations in place for them at home so they're not like, maybe it's abusive at home, they might not want to come back. So, for them it's not like they're going, they're planning on coming back anyway, they're just leaving for, like, as it is, that could be a reason why it's like longer for Black people." Young person

Some professionals also thought this might be the case, with young people being afraid to go home, or feeling as though they might not get a supportive response when they get back:

"They sometimes feel they have let families down and are afraid to go home" Professional

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Exploitation: county lines

County lines was also considered as a potential factor in Black young people remaining missing for longer, particularly due to them being further from home, or moved around to different areas.

"*Like with county lines if they're taken to far areas and different areas, it will be harder to track them down because they're bouncing around so much.*" Young person

One parent shared an example of their son going missing in circumstances related to county lines and felt that this form of harm would mean their child would inevitably go missing for longer.

"For us, it was because our son was, maybe not every missing episode, but involved in county lines. And that obviously is a longer period." Parent

Professionals also felt that issues linked to exploitation may be preventing some children from returning home quickly:

"Involved with gangs and drug dealing. Staying in trap houses. County lines." Professional

"People harbouring them, gangs keeping them out of sight" Professional

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Delayed safeguarding responses

Some young people told us that they felt the police response is often delayed, and that they are not always seen as a priority. They felt this meant that incidents would go on for longer because of a slower or delayed investigation.

"I think it's like after a certain amount of time that they actually have to do something about it. I think if you report it, and it's not a risk, like a ... threshold they don't like look into it, so not really like an urge for them doing it straight away. So, they might not think they're missing but I'm guessing like most mums and dads know their kids are not in routine and not doing what they should be doing. But I don't think there's an urge for it straight away."
Young person

"Because they don't try and find them." Young person

"I remember contacting the police and them saying, well, he has to be missing for 24 hours before they can report it. And trying to explain that he doesn't do this. So why are we waiting 24 hours? He, he's at home, he goes to school, he comes home, he goes to his clubs, he comes home. That in my eyes he's missing." Parent

"They don't care. They're just another kid on the street." Parent

Some professionals agreed that the safeguarding response for missing Black children was limited, both in terms of when they are missing, but also in terms of preventing missing in the first place:

"Professionals do not care" Professional

"Services do not do enough to disrupt the activities that lead to the missing episode"
Professional

Responses when Black children go missing

"We're overlooked. Basically. Like, just...yeah, being overlooked, not being listened to, not being understood." Young person

Key findings

- Young people had a strong sense of Black children being valued less than White children when they go missing, and that this impacted the response.
- There is poor coverage of Black missing children and young people in the media.
- Black children are often stereotyped, adultified and criminalised.
- There is a poor response to Black children in relation to emotional wellbeing and neurodiversity.

Overlooked and undervalued

Both Black young people and parents reported that a lack of value, worth and care were the key issues affecting how Black young people are responded to when they go missing. Black young people told us that they knew they were not valued as much as other children, particularly those from White ethnic backgrounds. Poor media representation of Black missing children significantly compounded these feelings.

Sense of worth and value

Sadly, most Black children spoke about feeling less valued than White children. This was the case broadly within society, and more specifically in the response when reported missing. Parents also spoke about less value being placed on their child, or their family more generally.

Research has shown that systemic and institutional prejudices can lead to unequal treatment of children based on their racial and ethnic backgrounds[8]. It is clear from what young people told us that this prejudice and racism is a reality in how they are perceived and the treatment they have experienced from professionals and wider society.

Whilst this research did not explore in-depth the broader impact of experiencing racism, the feelings described in this section give a sense of how deeply harmful this had been for

[8] Understanding Racial Disparity – Updated data analysis from the YJB (yjlc.uk)

both young people and their families. It is important for all individuals and organisations working with Black young people and parents to be considerate and willing to explore the impact of racism and value.

Young people recounted many examples, including their own direct experiences, of what they believed as people having limited to no care for Black children and young people.

"*Young Black people are not cared about as much as young White people.*" Young person

"*People don't take Black people going missing as seriously as White people*." Young person

"*The way that police respond to like race, cause from the way that I see things, they are less likely to actually like, try to find a missing Black person as much as a missing White person. Similar to like the Madeline McCann thing, cause there are probably other Black kids that went missing, but the search hasn't like been continued on for that long.*" Young person

The following example illustrates some of the more specific examples of how White children are safeguarded and responded to differently.

"*My White friends who went missing had lots of people looking for them, but my cousin who's Black was missing for a week and it felt like no-one was looking for him*." Young person

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Not taken seriously

Participants spoke about how the reasons why Black children are going missing were less likely to be taken seriously, and how their concerns or risks that they were facing were less likely to be heard or believed.

"*Black children are just seen as stupid or trouble. Most people in authority are racist and there's no real help for it, no-one does anything about it. Black children have tried raising these issues but not been taken seriously, so they have no option but go missing*." Young person

"It's almost like a forgotten person. It's like they're forgotten about, and it's not taken seriously. It's not taken seriously as other people that have gone missing, who are not Black." Parent

"It was always that thing, is it because we're Black, we're just being left behind and they're not taking this seriously and they're not taking us seriously?" Parent

"It's almost like they just didn't care, and I felt that all the time as a parent, and I think especially, I've always felt that way and you don't want to say it as a Black mum, you are just a Black parent. You've just felt like they don't care. They don't care about me. Would I

be treated this way if I was White and you hate saying those things because it makes you feel like all you are just this negative parent talking about Black and White and Black and White. And it feels so wrong because that's not how I was brought up. And that's not how my children were brought up." Parent

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Devalued, misrepresented and invisible in media reporting

Poor media reporting and the lack of attention given to Black missing children was another concern that young people discussed. From their perspective, they felt strongly that White missing children are held to a different standard in comparison to Black children and young people. As such, concerns about media coverage were spoken about in the context of Black children not being consider valuable enough to be worthy of media coverage.

"*Probably because in society a White person is viewed as more vulnerable than like a Black person*" Young person

"*The highest profile missing person cases only include White people which suggests that resources aren't very used for Black people*." Young person

Some young people spoke about how Black people turn to social media to report a missing child and spread awareness due to a belief that mainstream media will not report on such cases. A reliance on community and the wider public felt a better option than putting trust in the media to put focus on a Black missing child.

"*If it is Black people [in a social media missing appeal] then it's their friends posting them, not the police*." Young person

"*Think they* [mainstream media] *only mention it when it has been brought up with high numbers on social media but even then, it won't be on primetime news*." Young person

"I think it's less coverage. And usually when I see things about Black people going missing, it's on social media. I think also gender is important as well because I feel like even with Black girls it's probably even less likely that they're like reported on the news." Young person

One young person shared concerns about the type of imagery used when Black people go missing, such as using pictures which insinuate criminality, or do not reflect what people may view as 'vulnerable', further worsening racial stereotypes.

"[The photo used in missing appeals] *Looks like a prison mugshot or grainy for Black people and then other groups have a nice picture shown"* Young person

Parents also raised concerns about how the media respond to Black missing children:

"Yeah. When my son was going missing, they wanted to put me on Facebook every time, which I didn't like at first. But in the end, I just had to comply because we needed to find him and, and I'd say to them well, why is there a little White girl missing on the Evening Post? The local newspaper. But [child's name] don't get put in the local newspaper. Oh, that person's probably a bit more vulnerable. No, they never put that missing kid on the local newspaper when they've been missing for significant amounts of time. At one point my son was missing for a week, 10 days, two weeks, three weeks. Not once did they offer to put him in the newspaper or ask my permission. They put him on Facebook because they'll put everybody on Facebook, but they will only put White missing children on the local newspaper. I've never seen a Black missing child on the [geographical area] Evening Post website ever." Parent

"I've seen lots of sort of things go around where they're showing children who have gone missing, but you don't see that in the news. And there are lots of young Black children, unfortunately, many of them young boys. But that's not been highlighted, and I think all of these things should be highlighted. It should be made massive awareness so that they could somehow be, become, you know, you want there to be a stop to all of this." Parent

This was also recognised by professionals:

"The press are the press. They might clamour and claim they are the fourth pillar of democracy but its all about protecting their interests which usually comes down to spinning a story to sell papers and sell advertising. The majority of newspaper readers are White, so that's where the money is. Even when the newspapers do end up taking up a Black missing person case it tends to be for political reasons rather than actually caring about the outcome" Professional

"Black kids tend to get reported on social media whereas other ethnicities are highlighted in televised news" Professional

Black missing children & vulnerability

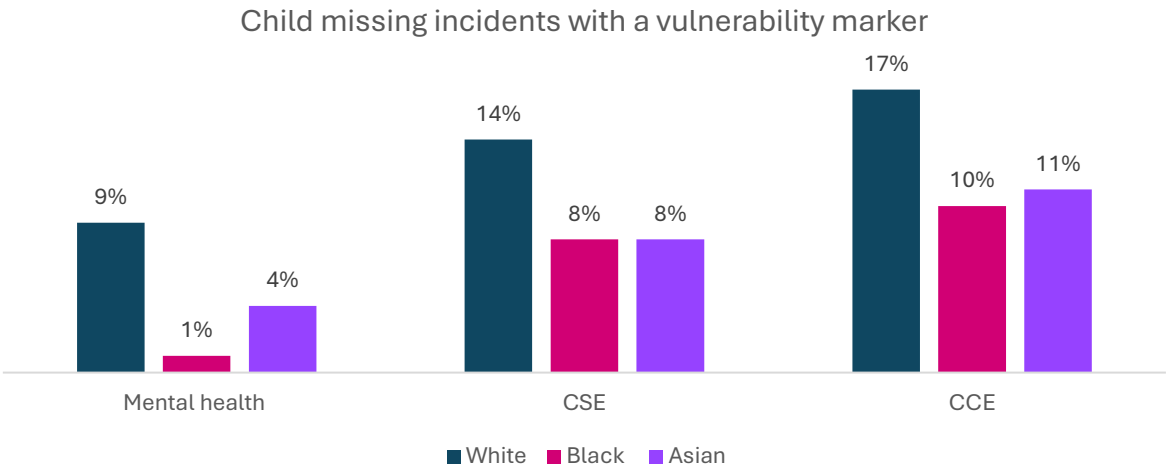
"Racial profiling, they might think that he is just a thug or that he's making it up for attention or to try and get away with something." Young person

Key findings:

- Black children reported routinely being stereotyped, adultified and therefore considered less vulnerable, and criminalised. This happened broadly within society, and specifically in the response to missing incidents.
- Under-identification or a lack of understanding of emotional wellbeing, mental health issues, and neurodiversity sometimes plays a role in Black children being seen as less vulnerable, or being less likely to receive support.

Black children are consistently less likely to be identified as vulnerable or at risk of harm, which can in turn mean they are offered less support.

When reported missing, research has shown that Black children are less likely to have a vulnerability marker for mental health, or sexual or criminal exploitation flagged on their cases in comparison to White children,[9] despite the fact there is no evidence they are less likely to be experiencing these harms.



[9] Missing People and Listen Up, *The Ethnicity of Missing People, findings from police and local authority data, 2021-22,* February 2023: https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Missing_Ethnicity-report.pdf.

In this research, participants spoke about a range of factors that they felt drove this under-identification of risk.

Stereotyped, adultified, criminalised

The young people and parents we spoke to shared experiences of children being adultified, criminalised and stereotyped. As a result of these biases, they felt children and families would often struggle to get the support they needed due to Black children not always being seen as vulnerable.

As well as broadly speaking about the bias in perceptions of Black people, some of the young people and parents specifically spoke about how and why risks and vulnerabilities are under-identified when Black children go missing. Although some of these experiences are not unique to the Black community, the statistics showing low rates of vulnerability markers, and the prevalence of these issues amongst the experiences we heard about, show that wider bias is directly impacting risk assessments and safeguarding responses for Black children when they are missing.

Whilst this section explores stereotypes, adultification and criminalisation as different issues, they should not be seen in isolation from one another as all these themes have one thing in common, racism and racial bias, and will likely interconnect as each can drive the others.

Stereotyped

In some instances, racism was either explicitly named, or described as a contributing factor in how Black young people are not always assumed to be vulnerable.

Young people we spoke to shared their experiences of racial stereotyping from society, and from the professionals who are supposed to help them.

"A lot of the time Black people, we can be stereotyped to be like loud and all these negative things so people might see a certain name and attach those stereotypes towards it as well and may not think that this person is even worthy of being found." Young person

"Racial profiling, they might think that he is just a thug or that he's making it up for attention or to try and get away with something." Young person

"[professionals] They don't care as much... because most the time they're [Black people] seen as bad people... like most the time they're seen as doing bad things... It's racism."
Young person

Adultified

Adultification [10]

Adultification is a form of bias where children from marginalised communities including Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities are perceived as being more 'grown up' or able to look after themselves, less innocent and less vulnerable than other children. This particularly affects Black children[11]. When adultification is happening, professionals may perceive children as more responsible for the situation they are facing, regardless of the circumstances, and they may be less likely to identify risks or harm[12] affecting the child.

Adultification puts children from Black and other minority ethnic communities at serious risk because they can be left without the safeguarding response and support that they need to stay safe[13].

Some young people gave examples of adultification bias as a factor influencing how they are viewed, the language used to describe them, and how poor perceptions play out in how professionals talk about Black children.

"*I think sometimes I have noticed that if they're talking about, a Black young person, they might say like 'young man' or 'young woman', whereas they'll say like 'child' or 'minor' [for White children] ... makes it sound more like they're able to fend for themselves, they're less in danger but describing them as a child shows the urgency and the necessity for a lot of help in the situation*." Young person

"*I think just people's perception of Black people is what I guess kind of decides how they're treated. So, being seen as a child, being seen as a vulnerable person is very important. And thinking of like, Black young people being more likely to experience certain things as*

[10] Listen Up have developed a professional inter-adultification model, which is found in Appendix 1 of this report. Adultification – Listen Up (listenupresearch.org)
[11] J.Davis: Adultification bias within child protection and safeguarding (justiceinspectorates.gov.uk)
[12] Ibid
[13] Ibid

opposed to other races, like sexual violence, for example, so then there's more kind of sympathy towards them." Young person

One parent reflected on whether Black children or young people receive support and concluded that due to their race or ethnicity they more than likely they would not be viewed as a child in need of help:

"I'm just thinking, would they get help as easily? And I know it sounds awful, doesn't it? To say because they are Black kids and they ask someone for help, would they just not bother? Because they're seeing a Black kid, right, as opposed to a child or a person? Forget about a child because you can be vulnerable at any age. But as a person, are they not just seen as a person that needs some help?" Parent

Adultification was also recognised by some professionals as influencing how Black children are viewed:

"Adultification issues / racial bias" Professional

"Some children are seen in the eyes of systems/services as older/more mature/criminalised and others seen as immature/have more tolerance/needs nurturing. I believe race, gender and other factors play a role both in the home and externally" Professional

Criminalised

Whilst young people spoke about stereotypes and adultification, parents shared the most examples of how their children had been criminalised, and raised concerns about how punitive approaches negatively impact Black children and young people.

"The police are punitive, they always will be and until we remove that punitive approach, we're not going to get any further with this." Parent

"You want to get him back to where he was. But services saying, oh well, we need to, when we find, unfortunately he's going to need to be arrested and then we can start helping and supporting. I'm thinking, but they are now, you're categorising as a criminal when he's a vulnerable person. So, he has to be criminalised before he's classed as vulnerable. But when they do criminalise, then they say, well, he was old enough, he knew what he was doing. And I'm thinking, well, you can't win anyway. Any way you turn, you can't win." Parent

"I wanted it known that my, I considered my son to be vulnerable and a victim of grooming because when he got detained at a police station and strip searched, none of that was recorded. Yeah, wasn't on police record. Nothing. Yeah, I was out, I was on holiday at the time, and he was with his dad and his dad wasn't called to the station, and when and when

I came back, I rang the police station. What happened? Can you give me the records of what happened? Yeah, they didn't have any record. So, for me, they didn't see my son as a child, as a victim." Parent

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Emotional wellbeing and neurodiversity are not always considered

When discussing why Black young people are not always assigned vulnerability markers when missing, some felt that this was due to misinterpretations of Black young people's experiences and behaviour, particularly how mental health and neurodiversity is considered or even understood.

"*I think because we're more likely to be perceived as like aggressive and anti-social and destructive. The mental health symptoms, like mental health issues, that we exhibit. It may not be taken as seriously, or taken as us reaching out for help or a sign of struggle*." Young person

"*If a Black person did say they had mental health problems and this was not recorded, it's probably because the professional thinks they are lying*." Young person

"*If it is not recorded anywhere, and the police locate them, the police might think they are being aggressive rather than having a mental health illness, and this can cause problems in the way they are treated and seen*." Young person

Parents also raised similar concerns about how Black children and young people's mental health is taken seriously, if at all.

"He was never given anything, you know, never categorised as somebody who has poor mental health or categorised as somebody who needs mental health support. That never happens. I don't remember anyone ever asking me if anything, it was me constantly saying that he needs mental health support, that he is a vulnerable person, that his mental health isn't right." Parent

Some parents also spoke about how they felt let down by professionals who did not always consider their child's neurodiversity such as autism as an obvious indicator of vulnerability, and that appropriate support was not put in place.

"When our child went into care, he was put into a homeless hostel and the information about his neurodiversities wasn't shared with his key worker. So, when he was dropped off in the homeless hostel right in front of him the social worker and the Child Exploitation officer said to the key worker that he ran away because we were too strict, but they failed to mention any of the situation that he was in in terms of his neurodiversity." Parent

Accessing and seeking support

"*Maybe not the police, as I know how they have treated me in the past,so I don't really trust them*." Young person

Key findings

For many we spoke to there were challenges in how they were able to seek and access the support and help that they needed.

- For young people, these challenges were mainly linked to mistrust of services.
- Parents also developed a mistrust of services, often following repeated attempts to get help and feeling let down over and over.
- Parents needed to constantly advocate for their child, and act as the professional in the situation, although some felt this wasn't unique to Black families.
- Black parents experienced negative treatment and perceptions from professionals, including assumptions being made about them.

The young people and parents we spoke to talked about their relationship with professionals including the police. For many there was little trust that services would help them or their loved ones. This was often due to firsthand experiences of racism or a perception that those services did not care about Black children, as discussed above.

Mistrust in services: *Young people's voices*

We asked young people what they would do if a friend was missing, and whether they would report their friend as missing to the police. Most said it would depend on the circumstances, but they would be reluctant to contact the police due to mistrust or because of a sense that it would not be prioritised or taken seriously.

"*Maybe not the police, as I know how they have treated me in the past, so I don't really trust them*." Young person

"*Not at all. There's literally no point if it's a Black person*." Young person

"*I'd want to report them to the police or whoever, my school even, but would have to think about the consequences of my actions regarding safeguarding and the family of said missing person*." Young person

They spoke about actions they would take on their own to try and find them:

"Depends on the reason. If it's something that isn't too serious, then I'll probably go and make sure they're safe on my own." Young person

"Text their parents, their siblings, to see if they've come home yet." Young person

"I'd go to his yard. I'd go to his house. Yeah. If their parents haven't seen them, it's their parents' decision if they wanna call the police or not." Young person

"No because unless they are in danger, be faster finding them myself." Young person

The sense of police making it worse in some incidents came through from some young people:

"If the reason is serious then I wouldn't, because I'd be saving them... If something is happening at home and they don't want to go back... Like abuse, or not getting taken care of properly... [Interviewer: would you trust when someone gets found that they would get help?] No, because their parents could just say nothing is happening." Young person

However, some did say that if there was significant enough risk they would want police intervention, although this threshold was concerningly high:

"If they've gone missing after meeting someone, then, it, it feels like it would be a big deal to actually, like, report them missing. But I would say it would be, you would be better off doing that than them getting kidnapped or something. And them just possibly never coming back though, because like, if you've gotten kidnapped, you're more, I would personally think that you're more likely to, like, just never come back rather than actually get returned safely. If someone didn't like call in to make sure you're safe." Young person

"My only action would be to call the police although I'm not 100% confident in them but I don't know who else I would report it to." Young person

"I'm not sure. I don't think I'd be completely confident [to report someone missing]. I think. I feel like I'd probably take to social media... But I think with police I'd just be worried about profiling and them thinking like oh that maybe they've just run off for some period of time and they'll be back in a day or two or like not having a sense of urgency towards finding the person, especially if they are darker skinned as well. So yeah, I would say that there'd be some like hesitation. But I would probably still resort to it." Young person

When asked about their own experiences of being reported missing, most of the young people said they had not, or would not seek out help.

Professionals shared that from their perspective there was a lack of trust in policing, echoing what the young people shared:

"When Black kids want to go home they get it done themselves – partly because the only people you can trust are family and partly because – it's the police" Professional

"There is stigma talking to professionals about issues which creates barriers" Professional

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Parents having to do the work: ***Parent's Voices***

The impact of missing incidents and a subsequent lack of support can have devastating impacts and did for most of the families we spoke to. Parents told us about broken relationships, lost potential, and a sense that opportunities had been missed when their child first started going missing. Some specifically felt their identity as a Black parent, or as a parent of a Black or Black mixed-heritage child, had directly affected their chances to access a fair and supportive response.

"I just feel like it could have been such a different scenario if we were helped and listened to, and all of us treated as vulnerable and all of us treated as needing that wraparound help." Parent

Mistrust of services

Like the young people, parents reported feeling let down by services, with most continuing to mistrust services due to their poor experiences. Concerns about police and social care responses were featured the most in discussions.

When talking about the police, issues such as delayed responses, poor treatment of the wider family and a sense of their child being stereotyped or uncared for were common. Some explicitly said that racism and assumptions about Black and Black mixed heritage children influenced how seriously police would respond to concerns.

"Though you're damned if you do, damned if you don't and you're the worst mother ever because you're allowing it to happen. But the police, the treatment that I've had, the terrible treatment we've had from the police, you know, I can't obviously say is it because he's mixed race because I haven't got a White child to compare it to. You know what I mean? But it's been so shocking the times I've reported him missing.

If I can't trust the police to find my son, who can I trust? Hence why I used to go and get in my car and go look for him myself and more often than not I'd find him." Parent

"I guess my thoughts have always been if at that point there was something that could have given me a bit more support and help and try to think figure out what is going on here then maybe, you know, both of us, more so him obviously, could have been helped and we wouldn't be in this situation now because it just went downhill from there." Parent

"I don't like the police. I hate the police. And it's because of my treatment with my son. I've had but a bad experience with them and half the time, as I say, I've found my son before they do. Anyway. They don't actively look for children. Oh, he's not high risk. Oh, what does that mean then? So, you're not going to actively go out and look for him. You're just going to let a few drivers know and drive around?" Parent

"There was supposed to be like a missing team social worker who followed up after each missing episode. She never, ever followed up. And I was begging for help from social services. And no one actually came until I think about the third missing episode. And that was only because I took him to A&E and asked to see if he could get a mental health check-up." Parent

There were some differences in the perceptions of White parents and Black parents, with the former feeling that some of the failures of services were not linked to race, but instead indicated wider issues with how the system responds to exploited children; whereas Black parents were more likely to directly identify discrimination, particularly in relation to the criminalisation of Black children, and negative perceptions of Black families. However, almost all the parents did feel that their child's race or ethnicity did have a negative impact on the support they received.

A sense of mistrust of services amongst parents was also shared by some of the professionals:

"Black parents know not to trust the police. Any information given could be used against your kid in the future" Professional

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Parents as professionals

Many parents spoke of having to take on the role of professionals due to minimal support from services. Some raised concerns that they were perceived as being difficult when challenging professionals about poor responses to their missing children.

"It should be happening to make sure that you're looking at every angle. I shouldn't be the only one reaching out to other friends and parents. It shouldn't just be me. I know that's my role. Definitely to do that. But it shouldn't only be me doing these things. It, you know, there should be, you should feel like there's a presence of someone on the case and really working with you, not for you, with you, to bring your child back." Parent

"He is missing. I'm trying to inform you, so you understand what's happening. And then it's like, oh my goodness, now I feel like I've done the wrong thing because now it's OK. It's all OK. So. It was like I built up my hope. For it to just be knocked down and deflated, just thinking this is me. I'm the one I have got to figure this out myself. I haven't got no one else to help me." Parent

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Negative perceptions of parents

One parent shared how poor perceptions of parents can act as a hindrance for professionals to work with them as partners.

"I kept engaging, I kept on pulling up to the services and say, I'm here, I'm here, I'm here, I'm not going anywhere. I need this to be done. I need access to information. I need XYZ, but the system looks at you as the perpetrator and does not want to engage with you as an equal partner. So, I found it hard to really work hard to get her even the little bit of service that she has at the moment." Parent

Whilst another spoke about how they felt that due to them being a Black parent they had to consciously always consider how they were presenting themselves to professionals, due to concerns that racial tropes and stereotypes could impact how they are responded to, and most importantly, how their missing children would be supported.

"Even the way I express myself for you know, I get upset or, you know, it's always, I feel like I can't get as passionate or upset about a subject that I feel I need to talk about for fear of their opinion of me. I'm not wanting their opinion of me to affect the decision they make for my child, so you know, as a Black person, you're always constantly code switching anyway we know this. So, you know I have to tone down my conversation with social when I speak to them because it's almost like you, you know, they've got your life in their hands almost. And police as well, you feel like, you know, I want to scream and say a lot of things to the police. But I have to be. I have to hold my tongue because the police have got that much ego. They're more bothered about how you talk to them." Parent

Almost all the parents spoke about a sense that they 'couldn't win,' with assumptions being made about them being bad or neglectful parents, but if they fought for their child, they were seen as over-bearing or too strict.

"It comes across as aggression rather than struggle. You're struggling. So rather than seeing that vulnerable side that, all they're seeing is well you're, you know, you're very forceful and you're an overbearing parent and you're being aggressive, and not realising, no, you're trying to help. You're trying to find something that's going to get him out from where he is, having been missing, and to help him to kind of be where he should be, which is in school, which is at home, college whatever it is, working, you know all of those things." Parent

"You know, I've called the police for help and automatically they're challenging me on what I have or haven't done. You know, I'm, I'm calling you now. At the end of the day, it's not like I've called you three days after he's gone missing. I've called you a couple of hours after he was expected to [be home]." Parent

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Assumption of low to no aspirations

Parents also spoke about assumptions being made about themselves and the wider family, particularly their social capital which suggests that professionals have lower expectations of Black parents.

"It's always and it I think it just boils down to that skin colour and when the police first came to my home, and I reported my son as missing. Rather than coming in and you know, wanting to find out that, OK, let's find out what's going on. The first thing they said is oh, oh, do you? Is this? Is this your home? Do you rent this home? And I thought my home, whether I rent, if it bought it, whatever I do, if I'm living at somebody's house, that's got nothing to do with the situation why I'm calling you. So, their expectation is I shouldn't live in a nice big house." Parent

"One of the things that that really, really baffled me and almost annoyed me is the questions around my employability and my standard of education. I felt so, so ridiculously, what's it called? offended by it." Parent

"Oh, and then all, we've heard this is this is the classic that we've heard. He needs a really good Black male role model. When our son. Like my husband. We're together. My husband has been an amazing father, and we've had that been told to us by school. By the social care team. By the police. And it's almost like me and my husband sit there when we're in the meetings and we look at each other like how?" Parent

These examples provided by parents presented a poor picture of services and professionals where racism and assumptions about Black children and their parents were seen as an influencing factor.

We asked professionals whether they felt there was any difference in the response to Black missing children and their families compared to the response to White missing children. The number of participants was very small, but it is worth noting that the respondents who identified as Black, Black Mixed Heritage and Indian generally identified bias and disparities in the response, whereas White respondents generally felt there was little or no difference. This suggests that people who have not experienced racial discrimination may be less able to identify it or feel comfortable discussing it.

What has helped or would help?

"*Kids are often patronised, not listened to or not told important information. When a kid gets back from missing, don't just shout at them. Work out what's actually gone on and why*." Young person

Key findings

- There were very limited examples of good practice shared in terms of the response young people or parents actually received.
- The few references to helpful support included:
  - The importance of peer-support.
  - Specialist help.
  - Third sector services.
- Young people and parents did have suggestions of what is needed to improve the response to missing Black children and their families in the future, including:
  - Equity and equality.
  - The importance of listening to and understanding each individual.
  - The importance of a diverse workforce.
  - Better multi-agency working.

Most of the young people and parents did not share much good practice in the response, for many there was an overriding sense of feeling undervalued or let down. However, a few did mention things that had helped, primarily peer-support, specialist help and third sector services.

Voices of young people

Equity and equality

Unsurprisingly, young people and parents called for an equitable response for missing Black children. This means eradicating any disparities in the response when children go missing, including from police, social care and the media.

"*Treat everyone equally*" Young person

Listening to children and young people is central to understanding

It is crucial that the experiences and needs of each individual child are understood by their family and professionals in their life. To do this, children and young people must be meaningfully listened to. Young people taking part in this research were clear that professionals should ask them what is happening in their lives. Both in terms of why they went missing, what happened while they were missing, and what help they might need in relation to that, but also in terms of more generally what is happening for them and what they need.

"*Kids are often patronised, not listened to or not told important information. When a kid gets back from missing, don't just shout at them. Work out what's actually gone on and why*." Young person

"*I can't be specific as it all depends on the child, but you know, just listen to the child*." Young person

"*Find what they enjoy doing and help them to fulfil their purpose*." Young person

Safe spaces for young people

Some young people expressed that they might just need somewhere safe to get away to, either physically or in terms of independent support, in order to have some time by themselves away from family and friends.

"*I also think there needs to be more youth clubs and safe places to escape. Basically, like a missing hotel, where they can sign in, so everyone knows where they are, but they can just have time to themselves overnight in a safe place. People are out and about a lot which is not safe I guess*." Young person

"*Helpline/support from people with a lived experience*." Young person

Representation matters: a diverse workforce

It was clear in some interviews that it is critical to have a diverse workforce so that children and young people can get support from someone that they are comfortable with or identify better with. The importance of being able to understand the young person and what they might be going through was mentioned, including the opportunity to be supported by someone of the same race and ethnicity if that's what the young person wants or needs.

"*I think, I don't know what it's like as a social worker, but there might not be as many Black social workers out there as White social workers. So, it's easier to relate to your own race or ethnicity. So, if you're a young Black child and you're speaking to maybe a White social worker, that social worker might not be able to relate to the child. Whereas if they're*

speaking to like a Black man or a Black woman about their problems it's maybe easier to relate cause you yourself may also have gone through something similar." Young person

"*There's a real lack of Black support workers. Other people just don't get it. Like, in my area, most of my friends are White and it's hard to explain to them cause they don't really get it*." Young person

"*More diverse workers who can understand what it's like to be Black, to be gay, to be trans, so you don't need to explain*." Young person

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Voices of parents

Parents supporting parents

The importance of peer support was highlighted by parents, highlighting the fact that getting support from someone who understands what they are going through can be critical.

"Find other parents that are going through this and sort of trying to link with other parents because that was more, that was more of a comfort. And gave you a bit of strength. I think that was the thing that was giving me the strength was other people, not the professionals."
Parent

Having someone to speak to

A few parents spoke about a specific service, SafeCall, as providing important support to them when their child was missing. This is likely due to the fact that participants were partly recruited through this service. However, their feedback makes clear that having nonjudgemental support from the same individual consistently was really important.

SafeCall is a free, confidential and anonymous helpline and support service, run by the charity Missing People, for young people and family members that are affected by missing, county lines and criminal exploitation.

"The only person that ever helped me in all of this was [name] from SafeCall. Without that man, I'd have probably gone crazy." Parent

"The contact that I had from SafeCall as well was unbelievable. It was the only support. Nonjudgement. I mean if you're asking for what people need is nonjudgement. I had a guy called [name] from Safe call. And he called me every week, and that was the only thing that was keeping me sane." Parent

Be child-first and child-centred

Similarly to the young people, parents shared that the system needs to be more child-centered, and focused more on what each child needs.

"It needs to be made child first. This system is not child friendly. The police need to be trained on children with neurodiversities and almost like go on a mini youth justice or social work course themselves about children and families because it, no, we don't trust them, you know, and we can only go to them when we have a problem." Parent

A whole family approach & better multi-agency working

It was clear from parents that there needs to be better holistic support for the family when someone goes missing, and that this support cannot simply be provided by one agency. The desire for help was clear in some interviews, but people were simply not able to access the support that they needed.

"When children go missing, people go missing, who are vulnerable, it's not just the person. It's the whole family. The whole family need that support that I needed. That services came together, and you know the police probation. If they had to bring social services in because of his age, I would have welcomed that because I've got nothing to hide. But what it was almost like, I was crying out for them to help me because I just didn't know what was going on." Parent

Conclusions

The findings of this research present a difficult picture of the challenges facing Black missing children and their families: the reasons why Black children are more likely to go missing are linked to entrenched issues in the home, in school, and in the perceptions that society holds of them. There were few examples of effective prevention, and little faith in the support that is currently provided, sometimes due to long-held feelings of mistrust in services and experiences of Black people not being prioritised.

While the experiences shared reflect some issues that we know are common for all missing people and their families, the direct examples of racism, including through stereotyping, adultification and criminalisation, show that these issues are more keenly impacting Black families and children.

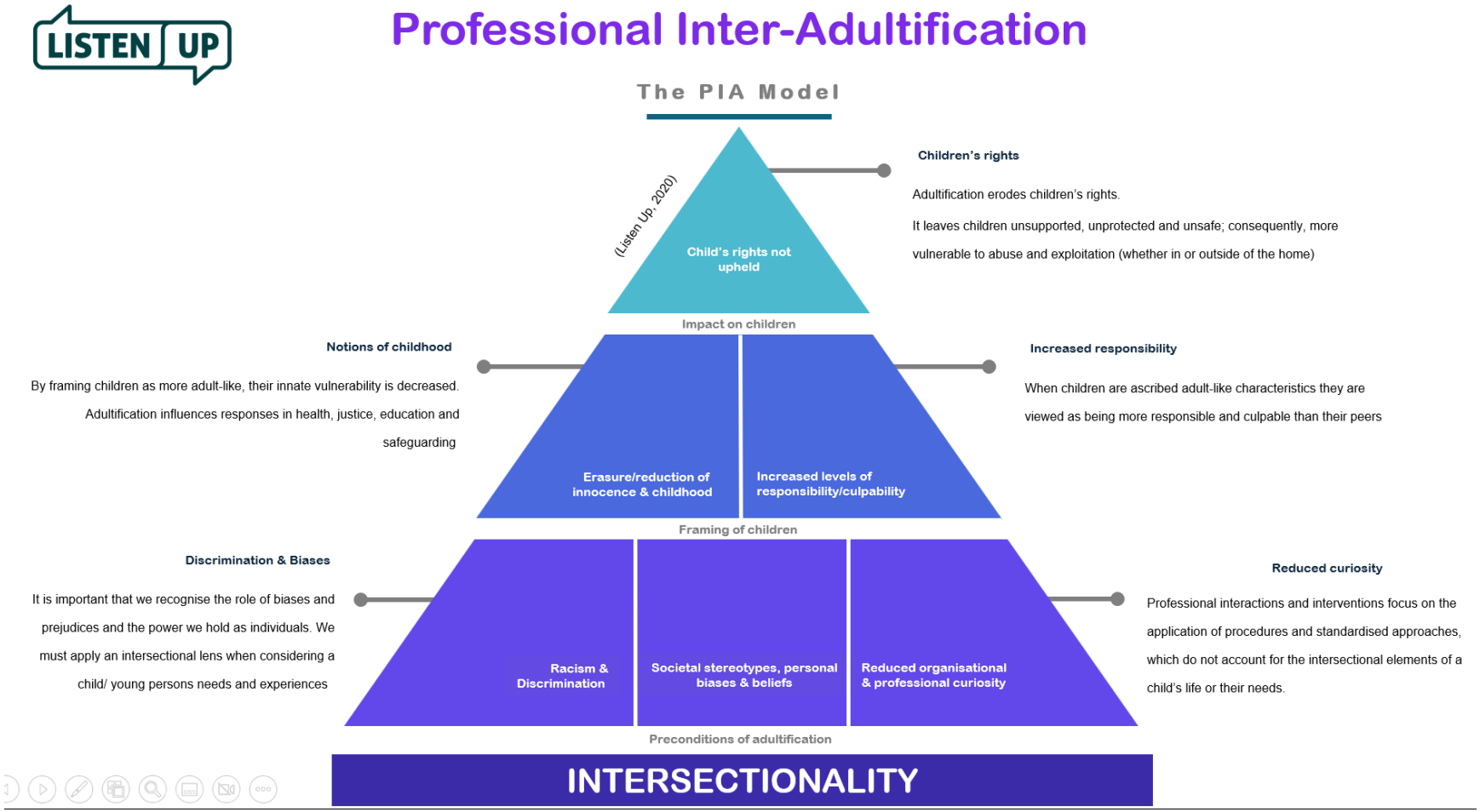
The experiences of Black children and parents highlight the role that the media plays in perpetuating hierarchies of value. Therefore, mainstream media must always consider how they report on missing children, who they prioritise and the imagery used. Scrutiny, accountability, and a continued examination of media reporting is integral to the safeguarding of Black children.

Professionals working with Black children who are at risk of going missing, or who have been missing, and their families, need to be cognisant of these experiences and the impact that racism may have had on people's perceptions of support, their ability to advocate, and the levels of risk that they may be facing.

We understand this report will be challenging, but we hope it will inspire action. The issues laid out are significant, and many stretch beyond just the response to missing incidents. But every professional engaging with missing children can play a part in challenging their own or colleagues' bias, in ensuring equitable identification of risk, in providing consistent, caring support, and in listening to the individual needs of the person you're supporting, without judgement or defensiveness.

When a child is reported missing, no parent should have to worry about whether they or their child will be treated differently due to the colour of their skin, and no child should have to worry about feeling that they do not matter enough to receive the attention, support, and protection they deserve. Black missing children need to be seen, heard and their experiences understood.

Appendix A: Adultification frameworks



Professional Inter-Adultification: Conditions