"We're told not to make everything about race, but it is about race."

The experiences of Black missing children and their parents

Executive summary

July 2024

LISTEN UP

missing people

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 the research report we 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 focus of this research has been on hearing the voices of children and young people themselves, as well as parents of children who have been missing. We have produced this short summary to facilitate easy access to the findings, but we would urge everyone interested in addressing these issues to read the full report, where they will see the direct quotes and views from those with lived experience.

We spoke to 15 young people, 7 parents, and 12 professionals through a mix of interviews, focus groups and surveys. Despite the relatively small number of participants, meaning the findings are not generalisable, their experiences revealed 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 discuss in the 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.

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.

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.