

# GUIDANCE FOR JOURNALISTS AND CONTENT CREATORS

## missing people

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

**A lifeline when someone disappears**



# INTRODUCTION

**The purpose of this guidance is to help your reporting of missing people and to provide the best possible information and support for your readers, listeners, viewers and followers.**

In journalism, the power to inform and connect is unparalleled, and carries the responsibility to wield this power with care and empathy. Shedding light on missing people can be incredibly helpful for generating public awareness and assistance. It is also necessary to recognise the profound impact that media coverage can have on the individuals and their families, friends and the wider community.

The depth of anguish experienced by people when their loved ones go missing is immeasurable. Therefore, every article, headline, or piece of content has the potential to evoke intense emotions - from hope and relief to despair and anxiety - while also influencing the trajectory of search efforts.

Missing People's media guidance has been created with people with living and lived experience to develop compassionate and accurate reporting.

Thank you for applying the principles to your important work.

**Rob, Julie, James and Cathy Stammers – family of missing Anthony Stammers**



*James Stammers*

*Cathy Stammers*

*Julie Stammers*

*Rob Stammers*



# GUIDELINES FOR BEST PRACTICE

## REPORTING ON A MISSING PERSON - TOP 10 TIPS:

**Someone going missing is a crisis. Most often linked to mental health problems, exploitation, relationship breakdown or financial challenges.**

### PLEASE DO:

- 1. Use official sources:** Base your reporting on information provided by official sources – the immediate family, the relevant police force and the charity Missing People. Ensure accuracy by verifying details before publishing anything.
- 2. Remember to include a way for your audience to pass on a sighting:** Your coverage could help find someone – include official details of how to pass on a sighting (police and the charity Missing People). Avoid asking your audience to contact you directly.
- 3. Respect privacy and sensitivity:** Please refrain from disclosing private, distressing, or potentially embarrassing details about the missing individual. Such information may discourage someone from reaching out, hindering their return, and could exacerbate issues for those facing a mental health crisis. This also applies to any images that could lead to embarrassment or judgement, even if they do originate from the police or family.
- 4. Request consent:** Approach people with a missing loved one through official sources where possible and respect their decision whether to participate in an interview/coverage, or not. The charity Missing People can often act as an intermediary to facilitate contact and consent. Always obtain consent for image use, ensuring they originate from the police or family.
- 5. Be unbiased:** People of all ages, ethnicities and genders go missing and it is important that media reporting is fair and balanced. Likewise, some missing people will not have immediate families who can speak to the media. That makes the person no less in need of the awareness you can provide.
- 6. Consider vulnerability:** Remember that missing people – be they children or adults – might be in danger. Focus on their well-being and avoid reporting that could compromise their safety.
- 7. Remove digital footprint:** When a missing person is found, respect their right to privacy by removing any online coverage related to their disappearance. Clearing their digital footprint can help the person transition back to their life and avoid issues such as problems with future employment. Special consideration should be made for features and documentaries that may be syndicated, repeated later or will be available on demand for some time. Please make families aware if there is likely to be difficulties removing content at a future date.
- 8. Highlight the support available:** Your coverage can encourage the missing person, their loved ones, and audience members who may be triggered and reminded of their own experiences, to seek support. Please include information about Missing People's support services, as detailed below.



## PLEASE AVOID:

**9. Speculation and inadvertent blame and judgment:** People with a missing loved one have consistently reported that speculative media narratives can be harmful and extremely stressful. Likewise, most missing people are in crisis so avoid suggesting they may have 'chosen to go.' Please also avoid reporting on negative and speculative social media comments made by

the public, as these can be devastating and harmful if read by families and the missing person and should not be encouraged.

**10. Mixing being 'wanted' with 'missing':**

Going missing is not a crime. Someone reported missing to the police is not a 'wanted' person, or a murder victim (unless police change the status).

# WORKING WITH PEOPLE WHO HAVE A MISSING LOVED ONE

**You will get the best response from people with a missing loved one when you establish trust by showing empathy, compassion, and sensitivity when communicating with them, and in your subsequent reporting. Please consider Clause 4 of The Editor's Code of Practice: [The Editors' Code of Practice - IPSO](#)**

- Remember, people are in shock and experiencing ambiguous loss – this is similar to PTSD.
- Where possible, only contact people via official sources, not directly, and respect someone's decision not to take part in your coverage. This process also allows you to authenticate that the disappearance has formally been reported to the police.
- Many families will feel the need for coverage to help find their missing loved one – they ask you not to exploit this need to pressure them to be interviewed.
- When you are living with the trauma of 'not-knowing,' you crave certainty on the likelihood of coverage being used, where and in what form. Please keep loved ones updated and be careful to manage expectations about whether a piece will be used, or not.
- Hold back on including any details in your reporting that could negatively impact the loved ones, or the missing person, even if they provide these to you directly. At a time of shock people can say or share information that they would not normally wish to be made public.

[What does ambiguous loss mean? - Missing People](#)

- Re-telling a traumatic experience can have negative impacts – and requires support. Please encourage people you are interviewing to get support from the charity Missing People.
- Please turn off your online comments, as loved ones have shared how distressing negative comments can be at a time of shock and uncertainty.

If someone agrees to an interview, please provide them with as much control as possible. Let them choose the timing, location, and conditions under which the interview will take place. People experiencing shock appreciate an idea of the questions they will be asked in advance. Open-ended questions allow people to share their feelings and memories better. Avoid intrusive or insensitive questions.

During the interview, maintain a respectful and patient demeanour. Allow the person to speak at their own pace and comfort level. Avoid interrupting or rushing them.

Your coverage can encourage the missing person, their loved ones, and audience members who may be triggered and reminded of their own experiences, to seek support. Please include information about Missing People's support services, as detailed below.

**For advice, support and options**, if you or someone you love goes missing, **text** or **call** Missing People's Helpline on **116 000** or email [116000@missingpeople.org.uk](mailto:116000@missingpeople.org.uk). It's free, confidential and non-judgemental and sightings information can also be taken. Or visit [www.missingpeople.org.uk](http://www.missingpeople.org.uk)



# REPORTING A MISSING PERSON BEING FOUND

**Most people are at risk of harm before they go missing and are at even higher risk while missing. The charity Missing People's research suggests as many as 75% of adults come to harm, and tragically 1,000 missing people die each year.**

Because people cannot get support to help them with whatever caused them to go missing in the first place, half of all missing reports are for people who have been missing before. Therefore, minimising the impact of any media coverage is vital to help reduce these numbers.

## **Found alive:**

- Only cover details provided by the police or shared directly by both the found person and their loved ones.
- When a missing person is found alive, their journey toward healing and recovery is just beginning. Please remove any previous online coverage of the disappearance. This respects someone's right to be forgotten and can aid people's transition from being missing to being found. This can also help avoid discrimination issues with future employment.

## **Tragically, found dead:**

- When reporting a missing person's body has been found (or is linked to a body being found), please be sensitive to those experiencing grief.
- Approaching the loved ones of a missing person following the recovery of a body requires the utmost sensitivity and respect and should only be made via official routes (police and the charity Missing People), and never made directly. Please give people time to process their grief before reaching out for an interview; respect their need for space and privacy during this painful period; and respect their decision – please do not repeat your request.
- Please see The Editor's Code of Practice - Clause 5 [The Editors' Code of Practice - IPSO](#) on Reporting Suicide if this was the cause of death.

Again, please always include details of Missing People's support services:

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# REPORTING ON THE CAUSE – LANGUAGE GUIDE

**Recognising the diverse circumstances that contribute to people going missing – and the harm they could experience whilst away – underscores the importance of respectful and sensitive media coverage.**

**For the latest facts and statistics** about the issue please visit:  
[www.missingpeople.org.uk/info](http://www.missingpeople.org.uk/info)

In addition to the guidance so far, the following are specific terms and advice around language that you are encouraged to consider in your reporting and headlines.

## PLEASE DO

- Use ‘the disappearance of’, rather than ‘the case of’, to be more human.
- Use ‘ambiguous loss’ to explain the experience of loved ones of missing people.
- Reflect the language the family and police have used to describe the missing incident or the missing person (unless it does not follow this guidance).
- Use the term ‘care-experienced’ rather than ‘looked after children’, ‘children in care’, or other similar terms.
- Use the person’s preferred name and pronouns if they are transgender or non-binary.





## PLEASE DON'T

- Call a young person a 'runaway', as it may assume they have chosen to go.
- Suggest a missing person is 'wanted'.
- Mention any potential methods of suicide if someone has gone missing with the intention of taking their life. See The Editor's Code of Practice – Clause 5 [The Editors' Code of Practice - IPSO](#) for further guidance.
- Use the term 'committed' suicide. (Please see the [Samaritans media guidelines](#) for further information to support safe coverage of suicide)
- Report assumptions about why someone has gone missing unless the police or family of the missing person have suggested/confirmed a specific reason.
- Use any victim-blaming language, including language that could criminalise or imply responsibility when a child is being sexually or criminally exploited.
- Use the term 'misper'. This is common language for the police but can feel less human for the missing person or loved ones.
- Refer to the missing person's immigration status unless relevant to the report.
- Use the term 'absconder' for people missing from care or healthcare settings - while this language is used by some professionals, it can feel less human and sometimes criminalising.

Again, please include details of Missing People's support services:

**For advice, support and options**, if you or someone you love goes missing, **text** or **call** Missing People's Helpline on **116 000** or email [116000@missingpeople.org.uk](mailto:116000@missingpeople.org.uk). It's free, confidential and non-judgemental and sightings information can also be taken. Or visit [www.missingpeople.org.uk](http://www.missingpeople.org.uk)



# REPORTING ON MISSING PEOPLE FROM MINORITISED ETHNICITIES

**The media plays a key role in some missing person investigations: from raising public awareness to shaping perceptions of the missing person and the risks they face.**

**People from Black communities, for instance, are over-represented in missing figures**, with 14% of all missing people being Black people compared to only 4% of the population. However, research has shown that despite this, Black missing people are under-represented in media coverage; poor coverage can mean people from Black communities are left to feel that their missing loved ones are perceived as less important, or less cared for by society. Equitable reporting can play a vital part in reducing the complex disparities that missing Black people and their families face due to a range of factors.

In our research into the [experiences of Black missing children](#), we recommended media organisations should aim to give equal coverage to reports of Black missing children as they do for White missing children. And, when reporting on incidents of Black children going missing, you should avoid language and images that perpetuate harmful racial stereotypes, including minimising a child's vulnerability.

While the recent research has focussed on the experiences of Black communities specifically, it is likely that these issues will affect other marginalised ethnic communities. Therefore, we recommend that a focus on equitable coverage is given to missing people from all minority groups.

Please see The Editor's Code of Practice – Clause 12 [The Editors' Code of Practice - IPSO](#)



# ABOUT THE CHARITY MISSING PEOPLE

**EVERY 90 SECONDS SOMEONE IN THE UK GOES MISSING.**

## **Life is lonely, scary, and uncertain when someone is missing.**

Right now, families are searching for children, worried they are harmed. Searching too for mums, dads, siblings, and grandparents who suddenly feel very vulnerable.

Missing People is there for the missing and those who love them. There when they need us most. There as long as needed. There for the long haul. There, if it's you, or your family.

But we can only be there with donations and gifts in Wills. Please donate today and help someone find support and safety.

[www.missingpeople.org.uk/donate](http://www.missingpeople.org.uk/donate)

## THANK YOU

### **Missing People would like to thank everyone who helped create this guidance.**

The people with living or lived experience who bravely put those experiences to use; the esteemed journalists and content creators who provided such rigorous peer review; The Editors' Code of Practice Committee and IPSO. **Thank you all.**

Missing People's Communications Team can provide advice and support when covering missing and related topics such as exploitation, CCE and CSE.

Please get in touch with Missing People's Communications Team:

Email: [PR@missingpeople.org.uk](mailto:PR@missingpeople.org.uk)

Phone: **020 8392 4511** or **07872 600 178**

Web: [www.missingpeople.org.uk/mediaguidance](http://www.missingpeople.org.uk/mediaguidance)

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