

GUIDANCE FOR JOURNALISTS AND CONTENT CREATORS

missing people

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

A lifeline when someone disappears



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This guidance has been created to support accurate, sensitive, and responsible reporting about people who are missing. Its purpose is to help you share clear information, reflect lived experiences with care, and ensure your audience receives the support they may need.

The main body of the guidance is written for journalists, covering best practice for reporting across print, broadcast, and digital media. However, we recognise that content creators now play an important role in how stories about missing people are told. For this reason, we have included a dedicated section for content creators at the end of the document.

Although this section offers tailored advice, content creators may also find the wider guidance for journalists useful, as much of it applies across platforms and formats. Together, these resources are designed to help anyone communicating about missing people, do so responsibly, ethically, accurately and with empathy.

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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

THE BASICS – WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT

Responsible reporting can not only help find a missing person but also minimise the impact on those who miss them during a time of shock. By adhering to these guidelines, you can play a crucial role in promoting awareness, empathy, and accurate information.

Right now, the media response to missing people and their loved ones can vary depending on where people live and who they are – with gender, ethnicity, care status and homelessness all affecting how people are treated and the amount of coverage generated. With your support, responsible coverage could help find missing people equitably and point more people to get support.

.....
The charity Missing People estimates that around one million people each year in the UK will be directly impacted by someone going missing. Some of them will be your readers and viewers.

.....
As many as 8 in 10 missing adults have diagnosed or undiagnosed mental health problems.

.....
People who miss a loved one experience ambiguous loss – noted by psychologists as the ‘worst of all losses, with impacts similar to PTSD.’

.....
[What does ambiguous loss mean? - Missing People](#)
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For the latest facts and statistics about the issue please visit: www.missingpeople.org.uk/info
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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. It's free, confidential and non-judgemental and sightings information can also be taken. Or visit 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:

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. It's free, confidential and non-judgemental and sightings information can also be taken. Or visit www.missingpeople.org.uk

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

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. It's free, confidential and non-judgemental and sightings information can also be taken. Or visit 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](#)



GUIDELINES FOR CONTENT CREATORS AND INFLUENCERS

As a content creator or influencer, your platform can be a powerful tool for raising awareness that helps bring someone home safely. However, this reach comes with a responsibility to use that power with care and empathy.

Sharing unverified details, speculative theories, or disinformation can create significant ‘noise’, leading to a distorted narrative that overwhelms families and misdirects police resources.

When influencers amplify incorrect stories, authorities may be forced to investigate ‘blind alleys’ rather than following legitimate leads, potentially delaying a person’s return. It can be devastating for those left behind, exacerbating the trauma of the ambiguous loss they are already facing.

To ensure your platform remains a helpful lifeline rather than a source of confusion, please follow these steps to verify information:

- **Prioritise official sources:** It is vital that you share or create content only based on information from the immediate family, the relevant police force, or the charity Missing People. Take the time to verify every detail before you post, and do not treat social media rumours or comments as fact, no matter how widespread they may appear.
- **Redirect tips to professionals:** Never ask your followers to contact you directly with tips or sightings. If you are going to post about a missing person, always include official contact methods for the police or Missing People

([Sightings and giving information - Missing People](#)) so that information reaches those equipped to handle it.

- **Reject AI-generated content:** Do not create or share AI-synthesised content such as fake voice notes or deepfake videos of a missing person. These can be deeply traumatising for families and act as digital disinformation that hinders the actual search.
- **Protect the right to be forgotten:** Once a person is found, respect their privacy by promptly removing any content you might have published on your channels. This helps the individual transition back to normal life and prevents future issues with employment or discrimination.



THE RESPONSIBLE MARK

Real stories. Real responsibility.

The Responsible mark is a pledge. When creators, publishers, and brands carry it, they are making a public commitment: behind every story are real people's lives.

Like B Corp for business, the mark signals that the work was made thoughtfully - with families first, not sensationalism.

When an audience sees it on a piece of media, they can trust it was created responsibly. The ambition is bigger than any single piece of content: to change how real people's stories are used across all of media and entertainment.

Only creators, publishers, and organisations that have completed the Responsible pledge at ResponsibleNarratives.org.uk are licensed to use this mark. Use of the logo without completing the pledge is not permitted. If you have any doubts regarding usage eligibility, contact pr@missingpeople.org.uk

The pledge process

How to earn the mark.

The mark is not applied for - it is pledged. The process is simple, public, and ongoing.

The logo for Responsible Narratives, featuring the word "Responsible" in a bold, black, sans-serif font. The letter "i" is stylized with a pink dot and a pink vertical bar extending downwards. The logo is enclosed in a thick black rectangular border.

ResponsibleNarratives.org.uk

01

Review the Responsible Narratives framework at ResponsibleNarratives.org.uk to understand what the pledge commits you to.

02

Complete the pledge form on the website. Your name or organisation will be listed publicly in the pledge directory.

03

Download the logo assets and apply the mark to your work following these guidelines. Always link to ResponsibleNarratives.org.uk.

04

The pledge is ongoing. If your practice changes or a concern is raised, Responsible Narratives may follow up to discuss continued eligibility.

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

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

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

Web: www.missingpeople.org.uk/mediaguidance

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