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Missing People and Homelessness

Guidance for teams working with people who are homeless

Let's end homelessness together

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Introduction

Every year 176,000 people are reported missing, approximately 100,000 adults and 76,000 children.¹ Police data shows that this is likely to be a significant underestimate, due to data limitations, differing recording practices, incomplete data and some people not being reported to the police at all.

Research has shown there are clear links between homelessness and 'missing', including similarities between the social and interpersonal factors that make a person more likely to go missing, and pathways into homelessness such as relationship breakdown, mental health and substance use.

Sleeping rough is a common experience of both adults and young people who go missing,² and there are links between going missing as a child and experiences of homelessness as an adult.³

What do we mean by 'missing'?

The issue of people going missing is complex, and therefore it is difficult to define what we mean by 'missing person' and what is considered as 'going missing'. Challenges around this are:

- Who makes the decision that someone is 'missing', for example an individual may consider themselves to have started a new life somewhere or have left a situation that was dangerous or negative
- Adults have a legal right to go missing
- There are varying reasons a person may go missing
- People may not be reported as missing to the police

The College of Policing's definition for missing is "Anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established will be considered missing until located, and their well-being or otherwise confirmed."⁴

Going missing has been conceptualised by some researchers as a continuum, ranging from an intentional break in contact by the person who is identified as missing, to an unintentional break in contact which is not the missing person's choice, and may have been imposed by others.⁵

The College of Policing consider 'missing' within a continuum of risk from 'no apparent risk (absent)' through to high risk cases that require immediate and intensive action.

Missing Adults

The most common reasons adults go missing are: mental health needs, relationship breakdown, dementia, financial problems or escaping violence. The most common issues spoken about by adults contacting the Missing People helpline were:

- Mental health needs
- Homelessness
- Problems at home
- Domestic violence or abuse.

While there has been limited research into experiences of missing adults in the past decade, evidence

¹ These statistics were developed by Missing People using statistics in the National Crime Agency Missing reports from 2017-18 and 2018-19: www.missingpeople.org.uk/about-us/about-the-issue/research/76-keyinformation2

² Biehal, N., Mitchell, F., Wade, J., (2003), *Lost from view, Missing persons in the UK*, available at: www.york.ac.uk/inst/spru/research/pdf/lostFromView.pdf

³ Shelter Scotland. (2011) *Running away and future homelessness – the missing link?*, available at:

https://scotland.shelter.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0019/348013/Running_away_and_future_homelessness_FINAL.pdf_nocache

⁴ Steyne, R. (2020). *Key information*. [online] Missingpeople.org.uk. Available at: www.missingpeople.org.uk/about-us/about-the-issue/research/76-keyinformation2.html [Accessed Feb. 2020].

⁵ Biehal, N., Mitchell, F., Wade, J., (2003), *Lost from view, Missing persons in the UK*, available at: www.york.ac.uk/inst/spru/research/pdf/lostFromView.pdf

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suggests that around a quarter of adults who go missing have slept rough for a period of time while they were missing.⁶ Many of the risks associated with going missing are also associated with insecure housing and homelessness, such as risks of violence and exploitation. Evidence suggests that the experience of living in hostels or sleeping rough is a main indicator that someone will report they felt in danger during the period they were missing.⁷

Mental health issues can be both a cause and consequence of people going missing. Police force data shows that around 50% of individuals going missing have a mental health record, which is likely to be an underestimate, as people may not disclose their mental health needs to the police.

Missing adults describe experiences of isolation, loneliness and the impact this has on their mental health and wellbeing. Adults can experience worsening mental health while they are missing, and some people may try to take their own lives.⁸ One study found that third of adults who had been missing had attempted suicide while missing.⁹ Poor mental health affects people's vulnerability while missing, it can increase the risk of harm from others, and their ability to look after themselves or make safe decisions while away.¹⁰

Alongside physical risks, missing adults also describe experiences of isolation, loneliness and the impact this has on their mental health and wellbeing. It's also important to note that some missing adults will not experience missing as a negative, particularly where they have left the family home due to violence or conflict.

Missing young people aged 15-17

Young people aged 15-17 make up 37% of all missing incidents reported to the police in England and Wales in 2016/17.¹¹ The main reasons young people go missing at this age is due to family conflict and poor relationships, which can be related to structural and interpersonal factors. Where reconnection doesn't occur, young people people's missing episodes often lead to them becoming homeless.¹² There are also strong links with criminal and sexual exploitation, and mental health.

Young people who go missing at this age can be just as vulnerable as younger children; the most common issues raised by young people contacting the Missing People Helpline are problems at home, experiences of abuse including domestic abuse, child sexual exploitation and criminal exploitation, mental health needs and living in care.¹³ As with risk of homelessness, young people in care are at particular risk of going missing: one in ten young people in care went missing in 2018-19, compared to around 1 in 200 non-looked after children.¹⁴

Research has shown that young people are more likely to have had repeat missing episodes, and on average the first missing incident will have occurred when the young person was aged 13.¹⁵ It's important to recognise therefore that young people coming into contact with homelessness services aged 16+ may have experiences of going missing, and have been exposed to the associated risks such as sleeping rough and exploitation, for a number of years. They may also be a missing person, or be at risk of going missing again.

⁶ Biehal, N., Mitchell, F., Wade, J., (2003), Lost from view, Missing persons in the UK, available at: www.york.ac.uk/inst/spru/research/pdf/lostFromView.pdf

⁷ Biehal, N., Mitchell, F., Wade, J., (2003), Lost from view, Missing persons in the UK, available at: www.york.ac.uk/inst/spru/research/pdf/lostFromView.pdf

⁸ APPG for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults (2018), Inquiry into safeguarding missing adults who have mental health issues, available at: www.missingpeople.org.uk/files/PandR/Evidence_Summary_Safeguarding_missing_adults_who_have_mental_health_issues.pdf

⁹ Missing People (2015), Mental Health and Missing Information Sheet

¹⁰ APPG for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults (2018), Inquiry into safeguarding missing adults who have mental health issues, available at

www.missingpeople.org.uk/files/PandR/Evidence_Summary_Safeguarding_missing_adults_who_have_mental_health_issues.pdf

¹¹ UKMPA Missing Persons Data Report 2016-17

¹² Missing People (2012), *Missing children and young people*, available at: www.missingpeople.org.uk/about-us/about-the-issue/research/903-research-publications.html?start=1

¹³ www.missingpeople.org.uk/about-us/about-the-issue/research/76-keyinformation2.html?start=2

¹⁴ www.gov.uk/government/statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoption-2018-to-2019

¹⁵ www.gov.uk/government/statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoption-2018-to-2019

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Local authorities have a duty to safeguard young people aged under 18 who are at risk. This includes young people who go missing, whether it is from their family home or from local authority care. If a young person under 18 goes missing from supported accommodation, or comes into contact with a day centre or outreach team social services should be informed. Local authorities should set out a 'Runaway and Missing from Home and Care' protocol that outlines how they will manage and respond to reports of children and young people missing in their area, along with the role and remits of different agencies.¹⁶

What happens after a person is found?

If the person who is missing is aged over 18, the police won't pass on their whereabouts to those who have reported them missing without the person's permission. Adults may have gone 'missing' due to violence and conflict. They may not want to be found, and they have the legal right to go missing, unless they are detained under the Mental Health Act or are within the criminal justice system.

If the person reported missing is under 18 their parent(s) or guardian(s) will usually be told their whereabouts unless there is reason to believe the child's safety is at risk. Once a young person has been reported as found the police will conduct a prevention interview (formally known as a 'safe and well check') as soon as possible.

When a young person has been found they must also be offered an Independent Return Interview, which should be carried out within 72 hours of the child or young person returning to their home or care setting. This is the duty of the local authority, and should be conducted by someone who is independent, e.g. does not have care responsibilities for the young person, in a neutral place where the young person feels safe.

The purpose of Independent Return Interviews is to:

- identify and respond to any harm the child has suffered
- understand why the child or young person ran away
- help the child or young person feel safe and understand that they have options to prevent repeat instances of them running away
- provide them with information on how to stay safe if they run away again, including helpline numbers.

Further information on purpose and benefits of return interviews can be found on the Missing People website: www.missingpeople.org.uk/about-us/about-the-issue/research/903-research-publications

Statutory guidance has also been produced by the Department for Education:

www.gov.uk/government/publications/children-who-run-away-or-go-missing-from-home-or-care

¹⁶ Department for Education (2014), *Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care*, available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/children-who-run-away-or-go-missing-from-home-or-care

How homelessness services can support people who are missing

Report someone missing

To report someone as missing, contact your local police station in person or by phone, or call 101. In an emergency you can contact 999. **You do not need to wait 24 hours.** The police will ask for the following information on the person, however it's okay if you are unable to answer all questions:

- Name, date of birth, home address and employment details of the person
- The last contact you had with the individual, what they were wearing when they disappeared, any details relating to possible reasons behind their disappearance.
- Any vulnerabilities that increase risk posed to the missing person, for example if they are under 18, have a mental health need or are dependent on drugs or alcohol, and any other medical conditions
- They may ask if there are any personal items belonging to the person that have been left behind for example a mobile phone, or laptop.
- A photo

The person will be recorded as missing and their details shared with other UK police forces within 48 hours. If you are not sure whether someone is missing or whether to report them missing you can seek advice through the Missing People 24-hour helpline: 116 000.

The police will risk assess each missing episode and the response will depend on the risk level. It may range from an intensive search to phoning friends and family or checking places the person might be.

Missing People work with the police to run publicity appeals about people who are missing. Before running a publicity appeal they will work with both the police and family members of the missing person to ensure it is safe to proceed with publicity.

For more information: www.missingpeople.org.uk/about-us/what-we-do/the-search.html

Reporting a sighting and giving information

If you have seen someone you know is missing, or you have information about that person that may support them being found, you can confidentially share this information through Missing People. Information will then be passed to the police.

This can be done by:

- calling 116 000
- emailing 116000@missingpeople.org.uk
- completing an online sightings form: www.missingpeople.org.uk/help-us-find-someone/sightings-and-giving-information.html

Supporting a person who is missing

A person who has been reported missing may have different wants and needs, and it is important to be sensitive to their experiences and the reasons why they have gone missing. Missing People have a range of resources and support available dependent on what the person wants:

- Contacting the police
The police will only end an investigation into a missing person once they have made sure the person is safe, not at risk of harm and have conducted a Prevention Interview / Safe and Well Check. Once this has been conducted the police will close their case and any publicity campaigns on Missing People will automatically stop. The police will inform the member of the public that reported the missing incident that the missing person has been in contact with the police, but they will not disclose any further details if the missing person doesn't want them to.

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- Advice and guidance for individuals who want their missing appeal removed from the internet: www.missingpeople.org.uk/how-we-can-help/missing-adults/what-we-can-do-to-help-you/1069-a-guide-to-removing-your-missing-appeal-from-the-internet
- Connecting with friends or family through a three-way call facilitated by a specially trained advisor who will stay on the phone to help with difficult, complicated or emotional conversations www.missingpeople.org.uk/how-we-can-help/missing-adults/what-we-can-do-to-help-you/338-setting-up-a-three-way-call-for-you
- Sending a message home to let family or friends know a person is safe www.missingpeople.org.uk/how-we-can-help/102-i-am-over-18/what-we-can-do-for-you/283-sending-a-message-home-to-family-and-loved-ones
- Support returning home or reconnecting with family or friends www.missingpeople.org.uk/how-we-can-help/missing-adults/what-we-can-do-to-help-you/282-we-can-help-you-return-home-or-reconnect-with-loved-ones
- Support with their missing episode or anything linked to that: Missing People runs a number of free, 24/7, confidential and anonymous services. They can be contacted by anyone affected by missing via the phone by calling 116 000, by e-mailing 116000@missingpeople.org.uk, or by texting 116 000.

Become a Support Partner

Sharing information about vulnerable adults and children as well as the public is invaluable in finding individuals who go missing. Sometimes, however, the police identify that public campaigns to identify certain missing people isn't appropriate or safe. The Support Partner Network was created in response to this. Organisations can sign up as Support Partners, and receive briefings on people who have gone missing in their area and may access their services. Briefings include information about the missing individual, and offer advice and support to the Support Partner and the missing person. For more information and to sign up visit: www.missingpeople.org.uk/help-us-find-someone/join-the-support-partner-network/become-a-support-partner/372-the-support-partner-network

The Missing People Matching Tool – London only

This tool cross-references information from the Combined Homelessness and Information Network (CHAIN) database of people sleeping rough in London, with Missing People's records of people who have been reported each year.¹⁷ Where there is a match, outreach workers are informed and can speak to the person who is rough sleeping and explore their options with Missing People.

The online tool only uses a limited amount of personal data – names, date of birth and a photo – which is used for the matching and then deleted, taking full account of data protection law and user confidentiality. When someone is matched, it is up to the person themselves to decide how they want to proceed.

Raise awareness

Become a poster partner

Poster partners are organisations and businesses who agree to publically display posters of appeals on their premises when someone goes missing in their area or when a missing person is believed to be in their locality. Find out more and sign up by visiting:

www.missingpeople.org.uk/help-us-find-someone/join-the-support-partner-network/become-a-poster-partner/520-what-is-a-poster-partner

¹⁷ Missing People will only have the records for missing people who have been referred to them by the police for case publicity. This will be a proportion of the missing population, rather than all missing people.

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Display information about the Missing People helpline

Missing People have a 24/7 anonymous and free helpline which provides support for those who are missing. Raise awareness through publicising the helpline across your organisation.

This helpline also supports young people who are worried that their friends are being sexually exploited. NWG and Missing People have posters that can be used to raise awareness about this support.

More information and resources such as posters can be found at:

www.missingpeople.org.uk/how-we-can-help/young-people/646-saysomething

www.missingpeople.org.uk/how-we-can-help/professionals/647-saysomething-information-for-professionals

Further information

Department for Education,

Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care

www.gov.uk/government/publications/children-who-run-away-or-go-missing-from-home-or-care

‘Lost from View: Missing Persons in the UK’, Social Work Research and Development Unit, University of York

[https://pure.york.ac.uk/portal/en/publications/lost-from-view-missing-persons-in-the-uk\(e4fb5a52-8b42-4f63-a233-743582c480c7\).html](https://pure.york.ac.uk/portal/en/publications/lost-from-view-missing-persons-in-the-uk(e4fb5a52-8b42-4f63-a233-743582c480c7).html)

Missing People

www.missingpeople.org.uk

UK Missing Persons Unit – National Crime Agency

www.missingpersons.police.uk/en-gb/home



What we do

Homeless Link is the national membership charity for frontline homelessness services. We work to improve services through research, guidance and learning, and campaign for policy change that will ensure everyone has a place to call home and the support they need to keep it.

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