

# **lost from view**

**a study of missing persons in the UK**

Nina Biehal, Fiona Mitchell and Jim Wade

**Thousands of people are reported missing each year, yet very little is known about who they are, why they disappear and what happens to them**

# **lost from view**

# a study of missing persons in the UK

**Nina Biehal, Fiona Mitchell and Jim Wade**

Thousands of people are reported missing each year, yet very little is known about who they are, why they disappear and what happens to them. Researchers at the University of York have completed the most extensive study of going missing in the UK. Drawing on case records on nearly 2000 adults and young people reported to the National Missing Persons Helpline and questionnaires completed by 114 formerly missing people, this is the first study to unravel the meaning of going missing across the entire spectrum of missing persons cases.

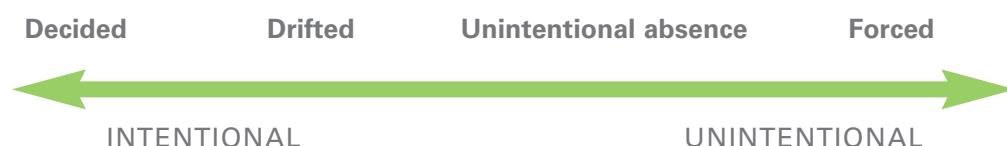
*I just thought the family would be better off without me around, so I just slipped out of the picture without telling anyone.*

People of any age may go missing, from very young children to people in their 90s. Among adults, men are reported missing far more frequently than women, whereas young runaways are more likely to be female. Those most likely to be reported missing are:

- girls aged 13-17
  - men aged 24-30

After age 30, the proportion reported missing declines progressively as age increases.

Most people go missing intentionally, to escape family or other problems, but others may not make a deliberate decision to leave.



Age has a bearing on the likelihood of going missing deliberately. Although people may deliberately go missing at any age from middle childhood, teenagers and adults under the age of 60 are more likely to go missing intentionally than people of other ages.

## Why adults go missing

<b>Decided 64%</b>	<b>Drifted 19%</b>	<b>Unintentional absence 16%</b>	<b>Forced 1%</b>
Relationship breakdown Escape problems Escape violence Mental health problems	Lost contact Transient lifestyle	Dementia Mental health problems Accident/harm Miscommunication	Victim of crime

Most adults decided to leave due to a breakdown in their relationships with partners or parents. In consequence, they were missing to other important people in their lives too, often for many years. In particular, fathers lost contact with their children when they disappeared after marriage breakdown. Similarly, women fleeing domestic violence broke off contact with children, parents or siblings due to fear of being traced. Some left to escape an accumulation of personal, financial, or mental health problems, while others disappeared following a breakdown in their mental health or in order to commit suicide.

*I generally felt everything was getting on top of me. My job was extremely stressful and therefore put stress on my home life and I just felt I had to get away.*



Most of those who drifted out of touch had lost contact as a result of moving away. However, this apparent drift out of contact sometimes appeared to be a form of avoidance, to escape unacknowledged family problems. Others drifted out of contact due to their transient lifestyles, occasioned by mental health, drug or alcohol problems. Living at the margins of society, this socially excluded group moved between sleeping rough and periods in hostels or other temporary accommodation.

*I always felt that, because of my alcohol addiction, I didn't want to disrupt anyone else's life. That's why, in the end, I didn't contact anyone. You could say I gave up on myself.*

The majority of adults who went missing unintentionally were people aged 60 and over suffering from dementia. Most other unintentional absences were linked to depression or to psychotic illnesses, where medication had been missed.

*I did not want to leave my home but I was slowly getting ill and did not realise quite what I was doing.*

### Why children and young people go missing

Over two thirds of young people under 18 left deliberately. The majority were teenagers running away from home, in most cases due to conflict with parents but sometimes in order to escape abuse, or due to problems at school. Some 16-17 year olds left due to a breakdown in relationships with parents, often remaining missing for several years.

*The reason I ran away was because I was sick and tired of ending up black and blue from the beatings dad used to give me and my sister.*

One in ten children were missing unintentionally, usually because they had become separated from a parent or siblings as a consequence of family breakdown. One in twelve, however, had been forced into going missing, either due to parental abduction or because they had been thrown out by a parent and had subsequently disappeared.

### Who is at risk of going missing?

Adults are more likely to go missing if

- they are going through a crisis or a difficult transition
- they are vulnerable due to chronic difficulties.

People in crisis may go missing in an attempt to resolve or escape from difficulties arising from family problems, bereavement, health/mental health or financial problems.

For some young adults, the transition to adult status leads to conflicts over autonomy or the choice of a partner which, if not resolved, may prompt them to go missing. The transition from institutions such as children's homes, prisons or the armed forces may also result in going missing, as those who are not adequately supported may drift into a transient lifestyle. People who are vulnerable due to dementia or other mental health problems, learning disabilities or drug or alcohol dependency are also at risk of going missing.

### The dangers of going missing

Missing people are at risk of sleeping rough. Around two fifths of young runaways and 28% of the adults surveyed had slept rough while missing and almost one third of young runaways had stayed with a stranger. Some experienced other dangers, including physical or sexual assault. Many also reported experiencing emotional distress and isolation.

*I was scared, especially when blokes spoke to me saying stuff like 'come back to mine and I'll keep you safe'.*

There is also a real danger that going missing can lead to an unintended long-term severing of family relationships. Some reported that it was hard to approach their families again due to feelings of shame or fear of rejection.

### Time missing

The likelihood of being traced decreased as time progressed. Among those traced, time missing was linked to reasons for leaving. Young runaways and adults missing unintentionally were often found in a few days or weeks and usually within six months. Children separated from relatives due to family breakdown and adults who left due to relationship breakdown, or who drifted out of contact, could be missing for years.



## **Outcomes of going missing**

Among those who were found alive, only 20% returned. Most of these were young runaways and people who had gone missing unintentionally due to dementia or mental health problems. However, return was unlikely to be an option for many, especially where they had been missing many years. Around two-fifths of those traced were happy to renew contact with relatives, but a similar proportion did not, indicating the seriousness of the rift with their families.

Among those who were found dead, one half had committed suicide and one third had died as a result of coming to harm or an accident. The majority of suicides were male, as were most of the vulnerable people who came to harm while missing.

## **Issues for policy and practice**

- Promoting greater public awareness of what it means to be missing may help to secure a more favourable climate for the support of missing people, their families and friends.
- Information about local and national services was not always available. Publicity about services should also address the full spectrum of missing cases.
- A better understanding of groups that may be at particular risk and of the range of circumstances that make going missing more likely, should help alert practitioners to needs and sharpen preventive responses. Advice and information, counselling and mediation made available at an early point may help individuals seek alternative strategies for managing their problems.
- Young runaways and many adults who leave suddenly need direct access to safe supported accommodation to avoid exposure to the streets. Those not intending to return may need other forms of help to re-build their lives.
- Families of missing people have continuing needs for advice, practical help and emotional support, including access to professional counselling in some cases.
- Where families lose touch, agencies that undertake social tracing tend to be highly valued by them. Services that facilitate direct or indirect communication between missing people and their families can be successful in mediating return or reconciliation. At the very least, a simple ‘safe and well’ message can alleviate the worst fears of families.
- Missing persons schemes are being developed to provide follow up support to young runaways once they have returned. It may also be the case that many adults and their families could benefit from an opportunity to explore underlying issues that may have prompted an absence, including opportunities for counselling and mediation.
- There are no reliable estimates of the scale of the missing problem. A single comprehensive database is needed to record all missing cases, including both vulnerable and non-vulnerable cases.
- The missing issue requires a co-ordinated lead from central Government to provide a clear policy direction and to ensure that the needs of missing people are reflected in all Departmental initiatives. A national forum, linking statutory and voluntary agencies with an interest in this area, could lead to the development of more integrated policy and service responses.

**Research undertaken by the University of York in partnership with the National Missing Persons Helpline and funded by the Nuffield Foundation.**