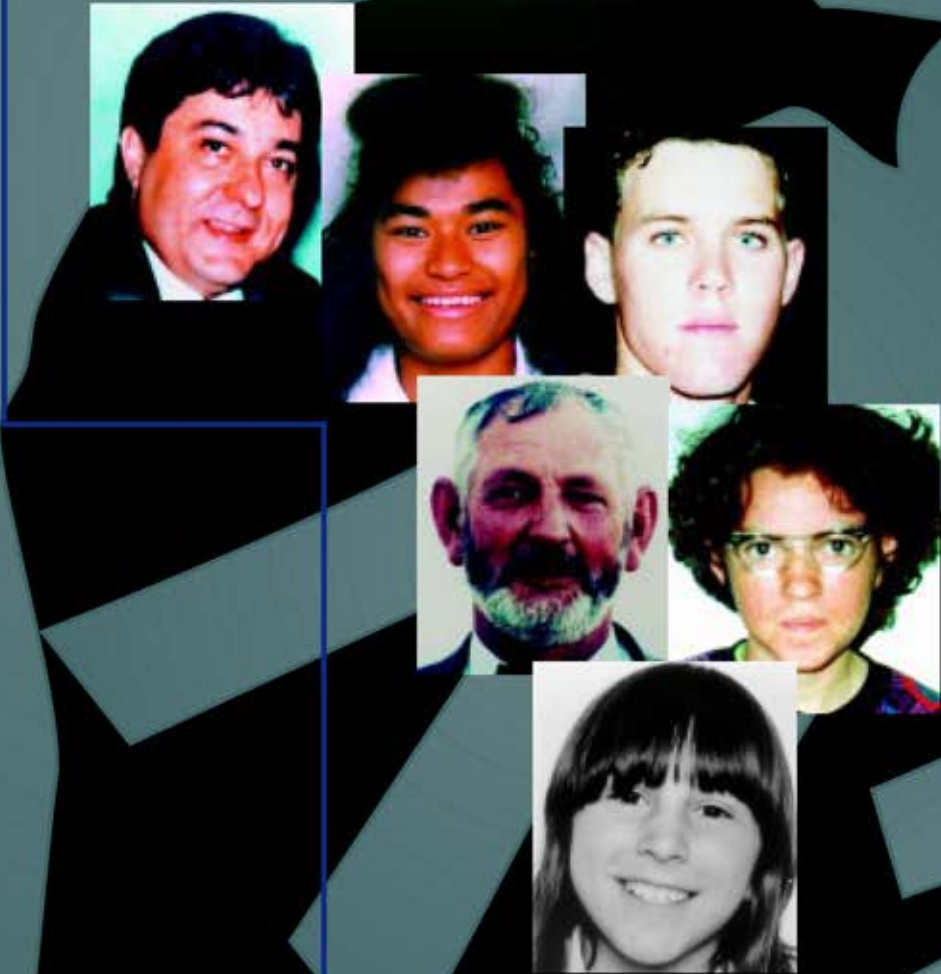


Missing People



Issues for the Australian Community



**National
Missing
Persons
Unit**

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MISSING PEOPLE

Issues for the Australian Community

by

Dr Monika Henderson and Mr Peter Henderson

An independent study commissioned by the National Missing Persons Unit
at the Australian Bureau of Criminal Intelligence

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Monika and Peter Henderson

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study examined the impacts of missing persons on the Australian community through a representative survey of families and friends of 270 people reported missing to police, interviews with families of people still missing, and consultation with a wide range of government departments, non-government organisations, community groups, and individuals with an interest in missing person issues.

An examination of statistics from police in each State and Territory and from the three non-police tracing services in the study (Salvation Army, Australian Red Cross and International Social Service) shows about 30,000 people are reported missing in Australia each year. The majority (approximately 28,500) are reported to police. Most people reported missing to police are located (99.5%), usually within a short period of time (about 85% within a week and 95% within a month), and often because the missing person returns home or makes contact in approximately half the cases (50%).

Men and women are reported missing almost equally but more children and young people (55%) are reported missing than adults (45%). However, when excluding people missing from institutions almost two thirds of the missing person population are aged under 18.

Families and friends (and in some cases missing persons themselves) suffer significant health, work, quality of life, emotional, relationship, economic and other impacts associated with the missing person incident. For every case of a missing person, an average of at least 12 people are affected in some way, either emotionally, by health or employment related impacts, effects on quality of life or on relationships, or a combination of some or all of these. Therefore while the number of people reported missing to police or to the three non-police tracing agencies is about 30,000 per year, a very conservative estimate of the number of people affected each year is over a third of a million. For some of these people the impact is ongoing for years and even decades.

The economic costs of locating missing people and the associated immediate health and employment-related costs are estimated at \$1851 per person for

people reported to non-police tracing services and (including other direct cost components) \$2360 per person reported to police. Extrapolating to the relevant 1997 missing person population, this gives a total cost figure of over \$72 million to the Australian community, without taking into account the long-term impacts on families and friends of the missing person. For example, including an estimate of the cost of lost lifetime earnings from missed education for missing persons reported to police alone adds another \$18.8 million. However, many cost components cannot be accurately estimated. In particular, emotional suffering and relationship impacts have profound, but uncoded, implications.

Families and friends of the missing person were generally satisfied with the service received from police and agencies responding to missing person issues. Specific areas for improvement most commonly identified were delays in police action and more contact and feedback to families. A sympathetic and understanding approach at the time of taking the initial report was the most commonly identified positive feature. Existing support services and counselling were not used by a large proportion of people, most often because people 'did not feel the need'. However, the most commonly cited area in need of improvement was considered to be the provision of appropriate support services. There was strong support for a service specialising in missing person issues, although the sorts of service people considered it should provide varied.

Eighteen priority areas for action were identified, based on interviews with families and friends of missing persons and consultations with organisations and interested individuals. These relate to support services, police practice in two specific areas, access to government information, avenues to address legal issues about missing person property, structure and coordination, and public awareness.

The magnitude of the impact when someone goes missing has not been recognised widely by the community as a whole and needs to be addressed in partnership between the government and the community.

BACKGROUND

The concept of missing persons is familiar to all of us. What is less widely known is information about its incidence and the causes and consequences of people going missing. The purpose of this research is to provide an objective base to help understand and deal with the issue of missing people, and hopefully, to better inform policy makers and practitioners nationally, so that the most effective strategies are continually put into effect.

There is very little research on missing persons. What is available is largely limited to overseas research on teenage 'runaways'. There is almost no literature on adult missing persons worldwide, other than on individual cases where well-known people have disappeared. The Australian literature is limited to a handful of research studies such as Swanton et al (1988) and publications on prevention and advice for parents such as Wyles (1988), Vincent (1993) and to largely unpublished research and analyses of agency statistics. No studies were found specifically examining the impact of missing people as a whole, on families, friends and the community at large. It has been necessary to rely on anecdotal information, case studies, and operational experience, or on international research, to make policy and planning decisions in Australia.

Policy and practice in the area of missing persons is therefore poorly serviced by research studies and by objective analyses of the breadth of issues that might usefully inform Australian policymakers and practitioners.

Objectives

The specific objectives of this study are to:

- describe the missing person population;
- quantify the impact of missing persons on the Australian community;
- evaluate the effectiveness of existing services; and
- recommend on future strategies.

Defining missing persons

The term 'missing persons' is often associated in people's minds with someone disappearing under suspicious circumstances. In a wider sense, it also includes people whose whereabouts are unknown but there are no particular concerns for that person's safety. Some families may also consider their child to be missing because he or she hasn't returned to live at home even though there is regular contact by the child. Missing persons can also cover family members or friends separated for many years often for reasons beyond their control. Such families want to establish or re-establish contact but don't know

where or how that other person can be found. Missing persons reported to police can include people absconding from institutions such as psychiatric hospitals, youth supervised care and detention facilities, or other institutions (other than prisons) where the person may be being legally detained. In these instances, the reason the person is reported missing may be more a reporting requirement under law than because of immediate fears for that person's safety or welfare.

There is no common definition of missing persons universally accepted across all agencies and the community. However, a nationally agreed definition of missing person used by Australian police refers to anyone who is reported missing to police, whose whereabouts are unknown, and where there are fears for the safety or concerns for the welfare of that person. This definition generally includes anyone reported missing from an institution except for escapees from custody.

This study will be looking at people reported missing to police, regardless of the reason they were reported missing, and also requests to trace missing persons with three non-police tracing services - the Salvation Army, Australian Red Cross, and International Social Service. The research excludes adoption tracing requests, child abductions by a non-custodial parent except where these are subject to police action, or those missing persons who are not reported to either police or the three non-police tracing services in this study. Because the focus of the research is on impacts on the Australian community, it includes missing persons reported by people living in Australia who have gone missing overseas, but excludes cases where the missing person report originated outside Australia.

While people separated by adoption, fostering or other forms of government intervention may also be considered as missing people, including this group in the current study would widen the scope of the research beyond what is practicable or possible under the terms of reference and time available. This study has, of necessity, restricted its scope to those missing persons reported to police or registered with the three non-government agencies represented on the National Advisory Committee on Missing Persons. This is not intended in any way to minimise the impacts and issues associated with separation arising from adoptions, fostering, past government interventions or the emerging area of fertility donors, but an acknowledgment that this wider area cannot be adequately addressed within the scope of the current research.

...For police, the definition of a missing person is anyone who is reported missing to police, whose whereabouts are unknown, and where there are fears for the safety or concerns for the welfare of that person...

Organisations involved in locating missing persons

Police are commonly considered the primary agency dealing with missing persons. Police in each State and Territory take reports of missing persons and investigate cases, sometimes depending on the circumstances of the case, in conjunction with other agencies such as State Emergency Services, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, or departments responsible for youth and family services. Police generally limit their investigation of missing persons to cases where there are fears for the safety or concerns for the welfare of the missing person. Police responsibility also includes cases where people have gone missing from institutions that are authorised to detain them because of, for example, mental health reasons or because a young person is a ward of the State in supervised care. Absconders from correctional institutions are dealt with as escapees and not as missing persons.

The National Missing Persons Unit (NMPU), established in 1995, has primarily a policy and coordination function. However, it also provides operational support to jurisdictions essentially in the form of a national database of missing person cases still outstanding after 60 days or where the person has disappeared under suspicious circumstances, using the Violent Crime Linkage and Analysis System. The unit has also developed and coordinated a number of public awareness strategies. NMPU provides secretariat support to the National Advisory Group on Missing Persons whose role is to foster cooperation between law enforcement and community organisations, to develop strategies to raise public awareness, and to provide advice to Government on missing person issues. It also coordinates and supports the Police Consultative Group on Missing Persons, a national forum of representatives from all State and Territory police missing persons units, to standardise and improve the police response to those reported missing.

The Salvation Army Family Tracing Bureau provides a family tracing service whose primary purpose is to trace missing relatives and reunite families. Cases involving people under 18, adoption inquiries, and inquiries by friends or ex-partners are not generally accepted.

The Australian Red Cross provides a tracing agency to locate and reunite missing persons in families separated as a result of war, internal disturbance, natural or other disasters. Inquiries are usually limited to cases where the inquirer is a close relative, a lifelong friend of a person aged over 60 or veterans who have served together. Cases where the inquirer and the person sought both live in Australia, adoption tracing, and, unless guidelines for compassionate cases are met, cases of family breakdown, are not generally accepted.

International Social Service of Australia involves social work rather than a tracing agency per se, but provides a tracing service in specific circumstances. It aims to assist people who, as a consequence of mobility for family reunion or work or through

migration, are faced with personal or family problems whose solution requires action across international borders. This includes tracing services for family reunion as well as adoption-related services.

Other agencies also attempt to locate or assist families in locating missing people in specific circumstances. For example, Aboriginal Link-Up provides assistance, counselling and support for aboriginal adults separated from their families when they were children. However, Aboriginal Link-Up specifies that the organisation is unable to locate missing persons whose whereabouts are unknown to their families, but can only look for people who have been taken away from their families under government policy or legislation, fostered or adopted (Link-Up, undated). There are also various agencies and areas of government departments with responsibility to assist adopted children in identifying and locating natural parents.

Government departments at both Commonwealth and State and Territory level may become involved in missing person incidents in specific cases without the person being reported missing to police initially. For example, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade makes inquiries about persons missing overseas in its role of assisting Australians whose welfare may be at risk abroad. The Commonwealth Attorney General's Department may assist in cases of international parental child abductions.

Families and friends may also choose to employ a private agent or service to help locate or find information about the missing person without involving police or other agencies.

Sources of information

Information for this study was obtained from a variety of sources. These include:

- Missing person statistics provided by police in each State and Territory for 1995-1997;
- A sample of 505 missing persons police reports, representing all missing persons reported to Australian police over a one week period (1-7 September 1996);
- A survey of telephone interviews with families or friends of 270 persons reported missing to police, randomly selected over the 6 month period of September 1996 to February 1997, and proportionally representative of State and Territory missing person numbers;
- Interviews with families and friends of 21 missing persons identified by police or other organisations as cases involving special circumstances that highlight specific missing persons issues; and
- Consultations with approximately 140 individuals in 90 government departments, non-government organisations, community groups, or research institutions across Australia.

A detailed description of the methodology and sampling methods is available in Appendix 2.

THE MISSING PERSON POPULATION

Incidence

Missing persons reported to police

About 28,500 people are reported missing to Australian police each year. This averages at one person reported missing to police in Australia every 18 minutes of every day. Figures for the past three years for every Australian jurisdiction are set out in Table 1. The number reported missing to police is also expressed as a proportion of the general population for each State and Territory (rate per 1,000 persons) calculated against the relevant Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) population data or estimates as at 30 June of each year (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1997).

While the actual number of missing persons reported to police across Australia has increased each year, the national rate (number of missing persons reported relative to the overall Australian population) has remained constant. The rate of missing persons has increased steadily over the three year period in two jurisdictions (NSW and SA), declined in three (Queensland, Tasmania and NT) and has shown no consistent trend in the others (Victoria, WA, and the ACT).

Two jurisdictions (SA and the ACT) show the highest rates of missing persons reported to police, well above the national average. In those two jurisdictions, missing person reports are taken by telephone, so the higher rates are likely to be the result of different reporting practices rather than representing any real differences in susceptibility to people going missing in those two jurisdictions. Tasmania has a much lower rate than all other jurisdictions and compared to the national average.

Different reporting policies about absconders from institutions such as psychiatric hospitals, youth supervised care or detention facilities may also contribute to jurisdictional differences. For example, SA annual statistics separate persons reported missing from an institution or from home. In the 1996-7 financial year, 34% of cases were persons reported missing from hospitals (psychiatric and general), supported care, or supervised youth care. In the same year, WA's proportion of absconders from institutions was 27%. Other jurisdictions do not routinely categorise their missing person statistics according to whether the person was reported missing from an institution or from 'home'. The sample of one week's missing person reports is too small to provide statistically reliable comparisons between jurisdictions, but does provide useful information across jurisdictions.

Table1: Number and rate of missing persons reported to police in 1995 - 1997

Jurisdiction		1995	1996	1997
NSW	no.	6626	7001	7432
	rate	1.08	1.13	1.18
VIC	no.	6749	6679	6949
	rate	1.49	1.46	1.51
QLD	no.	5547	5472	5153
	rate	1.70	1.64	1.52
WA	no.	3042	3090	3009
	rate	1.75	1.75	1.67
SA	no.	4239	4456	4732
	rate	2.88	3.02	3.20
TAS	no.	372	332	220
	rate	0.79	0.70	0.46
ACT	no.	1203	1015	1101
	rate	3.95	3.29	3.55
NT	no.	286	268	195
	rate	1.61	1.47	1.04
Australia*	no.	28 064	28 313	28 791
	rate	1.55	1.55	1.55

* excludes interstate cases which were also recorded in the State or Territory of origin

A national estimate was calculated from the one-week sample of missing person reports to police. Overall, 32% of the 505 cases were reported missing from an institution of some kind, either a psychiatric facility, general hospital, supported or assisted accommodation for the aged or intellectually disabled, youth supervised care or detention facility, or public hospital. In some cases, there may be real concerns for the person's safety (for example, an elderly person with severe dementia). In other cases, mandatory reporting policies may require the person be reported as missing even though there are no real safety concerns (for example, a teenager regularly absconding from supervised accommodation who always returns later in the evening).

...One person is reported missing to police in Australia every 18 minutes of every day...

Table 2: Number of missing persons registered with non-police tracing agencies originating in Australia in 1995 - 1997

	1995	1996	1997
Salvation Army	1791	1523	1799
International Red Cross	na	764	515
International Social Service*	71	87	68

* these figures exclude cases of birth family tracing or searches for persons separated by adoption or other statutory intervention

To summarise, about 28,500 incidents of missing persons have been reported to police each year over the past three years, of which one-third are estimated to be persons reported missing from an institution of some kind, most often a psychiatric facility. The actual rate (which takes into account general population increases) has not changed over the three years for Australia as a whole, but individual States and Territories have shown consistent patterns of increase or decrease over the period. There are large variations in rates between jurisdictions, but these may reflect reporting practices rather than real differences in susceptibility to people going missing.

Missing person tracing requests registered with other agencies

The number of missing person tracing requests registered over the same period with the three non-police tracing services in the study by persons living in Australia is set out above. In each case the number in Table 2 will represent different proportions of these agency's overall client group.

Summary

In summary, about 30,000 people were reported missing to police or to one of the three non-police

tracing services by people living in Australia each year. This is a conservative figure for the Australian missing person population, as there will be an additional number, impossible to accurately estimate, of people who leave home and whose whereabouts are not known but who are not reported to one of the agencies participating in this study.

This figure of 30,000 calculates to a rate of 1.61 per 1,000 of the general population. In comparison, the rate of road traffic accident death in 1995 was 0.1 and of non-fatal road traffic accidents requiring hospitalisation in 1995 was 1.2, while the suicide rate was 0.1 (ABS figures cited in Mukherjee & Graycar, 1997). This comparison is not intended to draw any conclusions about the relative severity of impacts between these different types of incidents. It is presented to show that the incidence of missing persons is as high or higher than that of other issues that generate far more media attention, public interest and government scrutiny.

Diversity of missing persons

These 30,000 cases reported annually to police or the three tracing agencies represented in this study include a huge diversity of characteristics and circumstances. Figure 1 gives a brief description of selected cases to illustrate this diversity.

...The incidence of missing persons is as high or higher than that of other issues that generate far more media attention, public interest, and government scrutiny...

Figure 1: The diversity of missing persons - selected case examples

MISSING PRESUMED DEAD

A young woman living on her own disappeared from her home one night and despite intense police investigation and considerable publicity and efforts by her family over the years to locate her, she is still missing without trace. Forensic evidence found at her home suggests she was murdered but her body has not been discovered and there is still no known reason, motive or explanation.

MISSING WITHOUT REASON

A mentally and physically healthy mother and grandmother, well-loved by an extended family and active in community activities, simply disappeared in the middle of the day while going about her normal activities. She is still missing after three years.

MISSING TO SUICIDE

A middle-aged self-employed widower living with a nephew was thought to be staying with a friend over the weekend but when he did not return he was reported missing to police. The nephew received a suicide letter in the mail and the missing person was located dead several days later. He had committed suicided.

MISSING BY DESIGN

A 15 year-old girl, after being suspended from school and arguments with her parents, left home one night with her girlfriend, leaving a note for her parents to let them know she was leaving home. The girls remained missing for 15 months. Both had apparently planned very effectively to disappear. They had organised to change their names through a legal service to avoid being traced through government records and then moved interstate.

MISSING TO ESCAPE

An 11 year-old girl disappeared after visiting her mother after school. She had recently developed a pattern of running away from home. It was only when, five months later, it was discovered that her father had been sexually abusing her, that the reasons for her behaviour were understood.

MISSING FOR ADVENTURE

A 13 year-old boy decided to go off on a canoeing adventure in the bush with an older boy, neglecting to tell anyone of his intentions. He returned three days later having had a wonderful time. He had never gone missing before and has not done so since.

MISSING AGAIN

A 9 year-old boy diagnosed with attention deficit disorder, epilepsy and learning difficulties has been going missing about 4 times a year since aged 5, simply wandering off to play, and missing for up to 10 hours at a time. The frequency and duration of his absences are increasing as he gets older. He knows he shouldn't do it but does it anyway.

MISSING TO ESTABLISH INDEPENDENCE

A 15 year-old girl living in a rural town wanted to leave home for some time so that she could lead the life she wanted without parental restriction. Going missing was done in conjunction with reporting her parents for abuse which, the family states, was done simply to receive a living-away from home allowance that she would not otherwise be entitled to.

MISSING - LOST OR FORGETFUL

An elderly man with severe dementia was reported missing by staff from the nursing home at which he lives. Despite the best efforts of staff, including the installation of special electronic security gates, he still manages to go missing regularly.

MISSING - WHO ME?

A young woman living at home with her family returned home from visiting her fiancée after the rest of the family had gone to bed that evening. Next morning, contrary to her usual routine, she attended an early morning church service, leaving before any other family members were awake. The family became concerned when she wasn't there in the morning, and after determining that she had last been seen leaving her fiancée's home the previous night, they reported her missing to police.

LOST AT SEA

Three friends took a boat for a day fishing trip on a calm weekend day, arranging to return for a fourth friend to join them at lunchtime. When they did not return, the friend reported them missing. A coroner's inquest has determined a finding of 'presumed drowned'.

PARENTAL ABDUCTION

After a recent separation that was not amicable the father was granted custody of two young children. The mother picked up the children from school one day and disappeared. There were fears that she may harm the children and take her own life.

MISSING - MENTAL HEALTH

A young male suffering schizophrenia and living on his own was reported missing when his landlord contacted the father because bills had been left unpaid for some weeks. He was located in an interstate psychiatric hospital months later after having had a relapse in his illness while travelling around Australia.

MISSING FOR TIME OUT

A young married professional, in a senior scientific position at work, with a pregnant wife nearly at term, an infant child, and experiencing study, examination, and financial pressures, did not return home after work. He was reported missing and returned home of his own accord after two days away.

MISSING OVERSEAS

A young man in his twenties was travelling overseas on a working holiday. He was not in regular or frequent contact with the family. The family had last heard from him as he was leaving Europe to travel to a South American country and he had said he would make contact from there. Months after, when the family had not heard from him at either his birthday or Christmas they became concerned for his safety and reported him missing.

SEPARATED BY WAR

A woman, separated from her sister, her only surviving family member, in the USSR during the Second World War, migrated to Australia post World War 2. She had not attempted to trace her family during the Cold War period because of concerns about repercussions for her sister. She initiated a tracing inquiry with the Australian Red Cross in 1990 after a serious illness. Her sister had died in the intervening years. However, her sister's son and daughter were located and contact was established. Her niece and nephew have recently visited her in Australia.

LONG LOST FAMILY

A tracing request to the Salvation Army was made on behalf of a 65 year-old man living in a group home when the manager of the home discovered that the man had two sisters listed on his birth certificate. The sister had been told the brother had died when he had actually been put into a home at age nine. She was located and has established contact with her brother, although there are still ongoing inquiries to locate the other sister.

LOCATION FOR MEDICAL REASONS

A woman had grown up believing a particular person was her aunt until told shortly before her mother's death that the woman was in fact her sister, an ex-nuptial child that had been raised as the natural child of her grandparents. The woman was recently diagnosed as suffering from acute leukemia and all family members are being sought to establish tissue compatibility for a bone marrow transplant. International Social Service is assisting to identify and locate the aunt/sister overseas.

Characteristics of the missing person population reported to police

This description of the missing person population is limited to an analysis of people reported missing to police. While some police jurisdictions have computerised systems that allowed detailed statistics to be provided over a number of years, others were restricted by manual record keeping systems or by computerised systems that did not consistently record social-demographic information of interest for statistical rather than operational purposes. The only socio-demographic information that could be consistently provided from every State and Territory police record system for the whole missing persons

population, without very resource-intensive manual searches in most cases, was gender and adult or child/young person category. Other characteristics have been extrapolated from the one-week sample of missing person reports or from the survey of families and friends of missing persons.

Age and gender

Table 3 shows the breakdown by gender and adult or child/young person category nationally for all persons reported missing to police (including those missing from institutions). Age and or gender information was not available in all cases.

Table 3: Number of missing persons reported to Australian police services in 1997 by gender and adult or child/young person category

	Male	Female	Total
Adult	7 772	5 155	12 927
Children and young persons*	7 476	8 157	15 633
Total	15 258	13 312	28 560

*under 18 except for Victoria and Tasmania where available statistics relate to persons under 17

Table 4: Rate of missing persons reported to Australian police services in 1997 per 1,000 people in the general population by gender and adult or child/young person category

	Adult Males	Adult Females	Male children & young persons	Female children & young persons
NSW	0.96	0.61	1.77	2.63
VIC*	0.94	0.60	3.60	4.23
QLD	1.15	0.77	2.71	3.60
WA	1.17	0.94	3.47	3.65
SA	2.46	1.36	8.33	6.21
TAS*	0.38	0.28	0.63	1.15
ACT	2.26	1.31	8.93	8.21
NT	0.83	0.60	1.69	1.82
Australia	1.14	0.73	3.15	3.62

* calculated against the general population aged under 17, other jurisdictions against those aged under 18

Males comprise a slightly higher proportion of the total population (where age and gender is recorded) at 53% compared to 47% for females. Children and young persons comprise 55% compared to 45% for adults. However young women represent the highest proportion of any one category at 29% and adult women the lowest at 18%. The converse is true for males, where adults are slightly higher at 27% than young males at 26%.

There are some consistent differences between States and Territories in the age/gender proportions, particularly in the percentage of male children and young people, which ranged from 17% in Tasmania to 33% in the ACT in 1997. The proportions for young females showed the greatest consistency (27% in WA to 32% in Victoria). To control for the possible effects of age differences in the general population in each State and Territory, the number reported in each age/gender category was calculated as rate per 1,000 people in the comparable groups in the general population (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1998).

In general, the pattern between jurisdictions is fairly similar to total rates, with Tasmania showing the lowest rates in each category and ACT and SA the highest, except for Victoria, where adults fall below the national reporting rate, but children and young persons, (particularly females) rate above the national average.

Nationally, and in all jurisdictions except ACT and SA, female children and young persons are reported missing at a higher rate and adult females at a lower rate, relative to their overall representation in the general population of each jurisdiction. In ACT and SA young males have higher reporting rates than young females but adult trends are similar. Both ACT and SA also have the highest reporting rates of any jurisdiction, well above the national average, and are the only two jurisdictions to take telephone reports of missing persons. This procedural difference may

Table 5: Number of missing persons reported to Australian police services over a one week period by gender and age category excluding those reported missing from institutions

	Male	Female	Total
Under 10	10	6	16
10 – 19	97	111	208
20 – 29	19	20	39
30 – 39	9	15	24
40 – 49	11	8	19
50 – 59	6	4	10
60 – 69	4	1	5
70 – 79	2	4	6
80 – 89	3	1	4
90 +	1	0	1
Total	162	170	332
Total under 18	102	111	213
Total 18 or over	60	59	119

Excludes 12 cases where either age, gender, or both are not stated

affect the likelihood of young males missing for short periods of time being reported to police. The differences between jurisdictions may also reflect different reporting requirements or practices for

reporting young people absconding from youth institutions or supervised accommodation when under some sort of care or control order.

These figures represent the total missing person population reported to police including those missing from institutions. The one-week sample of missing person reports provides more detailed information on age and gender, separating out those reported missing from institutions.

These figures show some differences to the earlier analysis of the total missing person population in 1997, which included people reported missing from institutions. When those reported missing from institutions are excluded, males and females show more similar percentages at 49% and 51% respectively. People under 18 comprise 64% and adults 36%.

As before, young females represent the highest proportion of any one category at 33% and adult women the lowest at 18%. However, unlike before, adult males comprise only 18% while young males comprise 31%. The gender differences noted in the earlier analysis have almost disappeared, and age differences are much more apparent.

The earlier analysis of total missing person statistics defined young persons as those under 17 in two jurisdictions while this analysis is based on a consistent distinction at 18 years of age. A slightly higher proportion of young persons would be expected for this reason alone. However, the differences found are more likely to be the result of excluding people reported missing from institutions, who are most likely to be adult males. In fact, 42% of persons reported missing from institutions in the week's sample of missing person reports were males aged 18 or over, compared to 26% for adult females, 19% for young males and 14% for young females. The average age of people reported missing from institutions is 33.6 years compared to 22.9 for those not missing from institutions.

Analysis of the total population of persons reported missing to police in 1997 shows slightly lower proportions of females to males and of adults to children and young persons (as defined by the particular jurisdiction), although there is a small over-representation of young females. However, when excluding persons reported missing from institutions and using a consistent figure of 18 years and over to define adult status, extrapolations from the one-week sample reduce the gender differences and further reduce the proportion of adults to almost one-third. The survey of families and friends of 270 missing persons shows similar proportions and average age at the time the person went missing (22 years for the survey group as a whole). The average age of adults in the survey was 37 years and 14 years for those aged under 18.

There are few internationally available statistics for comparison, and these vary in either direction from these Australian figures. For example, UK Helpline cites only 40% of its missing persons are aged under

18 (National Missing Persons Helpline, 1996). Hirschel and Lab (1988) found 63% of missing persons were under 18 in their analysis of one-year's missing person reports in a large American city.

Other socio-demographics

Missing person reports do not routinely include socio-demographic details other than age and gender. However, the survey of families and friends of missing persons provided information on the missing person's country of birth, occupation, marital status, and living arrangements. The majority (86%) were born in Australia. Of those born elsewhere, 4 were born in New Zealand, 6 in the United Kingdom, 3 in South Africa, 2 in Italy, and one case each in another 15 countries including China, India, Fiji, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Algeria, Russia, the United States, and others. The missing person population therefore reflects the multicultural diversity of Australia's population, although the proportion of missing people born in countries other than Australia is somewhat lower than in the Australian general population where only 77% are born in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1998). The difference is partly due the higher proportion of people aged under 18 in the missing person population compared to the general population (50% compared to 25%). The number of adult missing persons born in Australia was 79%, much closer to the general population figures, compared to 92% of those aged 18 or under.

As expected from the age distribution, 60% were students, almost all of those (96%) at primary or secondary schools. The 19% currently employed covered a diversity of occupations, from process worker and cleaner to scientist and business director. A further 11% were unemployed, 4% retired, 2% pensioners, 3% home duties, and 1% preschool age children or infants. Proportions of unemployed adults in the survey (22%) compared to those working (47%) or not in the workforce (30%) are somewhat higher than in the Australian general population (6%, 56% and 38% respectively, Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1998). This may be due, in part, to ABS figures measuring the population over 15 or may represent real differences in the missing person population.

As expected from the age distribution, most were single (87%), 9% married or in defacto relationships, 3% divorced or separated, and 1% widowed. Most (66%) lived in the parental home, 18% in their own homes (either on their own or with their own families, partners or friends), and 8% with another relative (most commonly grandparents, a brother or sister). Another 5% lived in some other type of living arrangement (including hotels, caravan parks, foster homes, shelters) at the time they went missing and 3% were travelling overseas or interstate, or were visiting or temporarily staying with families or friends. Most (78%) lived in a city or its suburbs, 15% in a rural town, 7% in the country, and two people were travelling interstate or overseas at the time they were reported missing. Relative to the

...In about one-third of cases the person had gone missing before and often under similar circumstances...

proportions in the Australian general population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1998), people living in country areas appear to be under-represented among missing persons reported to police.

There are few differences between adults and children or young persons on these socio-demographic characteristics, apart from the obvious age-related differences expected in areas such as marital and occupational status, and the higher proportion of adults born in countries outside Australia (21% compared to 8%).

Prior or subsequent history of going missing

The survey of families and friends of missing persons also provided information about previous incidents of going missing. In 34% of cases the person had gone missing before and, in 38% of relevant cases, had gone missing within the 18-24 months afterwards. Half (50%) had either gone missing before, or afterwards, or both. In most cases, these other incidents were not reported to police. In about one-third of cases there was only one previous incident. Others ranged from several prior episodes to regular disappearances, for example, on a monthly basis for four years. The length of time missing on each prior or subsequent occasion varied, but people commonly stated that the person went missing under similar circumstances to the current incident.

About one-quarter of adults had a previous history of going missing (26%) compared to those under 18 (39%) and 20% of adults compared to 46% of those under 18 went missing subsequently. Over half of children and young people (59%) had gone missing

either previously or subsequently or both, compared to about one-third of adults (36%). In both cases, many of these other incidents were not reported to police.

These figures are consistent with other research studies and statistical analyses. For example, Kapiardis's (1995) analysis of 1991/92 Victorian missing person statistics separated persons reported missing only once during the year from those reported more than once in that year. Only 13% of people were responsible for 29% of the year's missing person reports. The multiple-incident people were more likely to be aged 13-17 years than those only reported missing on one occasion during the year (83 and 53% respectively), to be missing over 24 hours (67% and 56%), and to be wards of the State (42 and 7%).

The most comprehensive American survey of missing children (Finkelhor et al 1990) states that 36% of children had run away at least once in the previous year. UK figures quoted by the National Missing Persons Helpline (1996) also show one-third of young runaways account for three-quarters of missing person reports on those aged under 18 each year. Hirschel & Lab's (1988) analysis of an American city's police reports found 33% had previously been reported missing. A survey of juvenile runaways by NSW Police Service (Marcon 1995) found 41% had previously run away.

Overall, a small proportion of children and young persons appear to account for a disproportionate number of missing person reports to police. Further, the number of times that these repeaters actually go missing is under-represented in police statistics because families often do not report such incidents to police.

Table 6: Special needs of missing persons identified by families and friends of missing persons in the survey or recorded by police in the one-week sample of missing person reports (excluding missing from institutions)

	Survey*	Sample of reports
Physical health	36	23
Mental health disorder or severe emotional distress	48	60
Alzheimers, dementia, intellectual disability or brain damage	12	12
Attention deficit disorder, hyperactivity or behavioural disorder	22	1
Alcohol or drug problem	21	9
Suicide risk	6	17
Other eg speech/hearing disorder, infant or child under 5	11	8
Total	156	130

*multiple needs identified for some people

Table 7: Number of missing persons reported to Australian police services over a one week period according to type of institution reported missing from and gender

Type of Institution	Male	Female	Total*
Psychiatric	52	35	88
Aged Care	8	7	15
Intellectual	2	7	9
Medical	3	3	6
Youth	15	27	42
Total*	81	79	161

* Totals include one report from a psychiatric institution where gender was not stated and one report where type of institution was not specified

Special needs

The one-week sample of missing person reports (excluding persons reported missing from institutions) included 102 cases (30%) where one or more special needs were recorded. Physical and mental health problems predominated. In the survey, families or friends identified one or more special needs in 46% of cases. The most common concerns were some form of physical health problem ranging from mild asthma to insulin-dependent diabetes. Also common were identified mental health concerns particularly depression. Given the more detailed information available from the survey interview, it is not surprising that a higher proportion of missing persons were identified as having some special need. For example, physical health needs cited in the survey included a number of cases of asthma not severe enough to be life-threatening if the missing person did not take or have ready access to medication. Such information would not necessarily be relevant to the police report.

Adult missing persons were far more likely to have one or more special needs identified by families and friends in the survey (62%) than those aged under 18 (38%). Mental health disorders predominated in the adult group. Other special needs were obviously age specific, such as Alzheimers and dementia or Attention Deficit and Disorder and hyperactivity.

Hirschel & Lab's (1988) analysis found 14% of police reports identified a physical or mental handicap and 9% an alcohol or drug problem, figures reasonably consistent with the analysis of Australian police reports.

Circumstances of the missing person incident

Place

The one-week sample of missing person reports was

analysed separately according to whether the person reported went missing from an institution or supervised care situation.

Most commonly, people reported missing from institutions went missing from psychiatric or mental health facilities (55%); supervised youth care or detention facility (27%). Similar proportions of young people (30%) went missing from care in the United Kingdom (Abrahams & Mungall, 1992).

The place the missing person was last seen or deemed to have gone missing from was coded for the one-week sample of missing person reports (excluding those reported missing from institutions) and the survey of families and friends of missing persons.

The proportions are very similar across the survey of families and friends and the one-week sample of police reports. About half of all missing persons were last seen, or went missing from, their own home. The next most frequent categories were from school or travel to/from school (15% and 16% respectively) or from a public place (15% and 9%), most commonly commercial or entertainment areas. This is comparable with Hirshel & Lab's (1988) figures of 9% going missing from a public building, commercial venue or outside location.

Time of day and day of week

Based on the analysis of the sample of missing person reports (excluding persons reported missing from institutions), the peak day of the week for making the report was Friday (20%) compared to Monday-

Table 8: Place the missing person was last seen as identified by families and friends of missing persons or recorded in the sample of missing person reports (excluding missing from institutions)

	Survey*	Sample of reports
Own Home	145	156
Other person's home	16	31
Workplace	9	9
School or travel to school	39	51
Public Place	24	48
Other	10	23
Total*	243	318

* excludes 11 cases of 'out with friends' where there is insufficient information to categorise and 16 cases where the family or friend did not know where the person was last seen or went missing from

Thursday (56%) and the weekend (24%). The most common times of day were the evening hours (between 6 and 11 pm) when 42% of reports were lodged, compared to 33% in the afternoon (noon to 5 pm), 16% in the morning (6 to 11 am) and 9% during the night (midnight to 5 am).

However, the time of day and day of week that the missing person was reported as last seen shows a slightly different pattern. There was no obvious peak day, with 17% last seen on Friday, 63% on a weekday, and 19% on the weekend. The most common times of day were mornings and afternoons (38% and 33% respectively) compared to 21% in the evening and 8% at night.

The survey of families and friends of missing persons asked which day of the week and time of day the missing person went missing or was last seen. Friday showed a higher proportion at 24% compared to 45% between Monday and Thursday and 25% on the weekend. These percentages exclude 31 cases where day of the week could not be recalled or determined. Time of day showed similar proportions, with 66% of the survey reporting the person last seen or going missing during the day, 27% in the evening, and 7% during the night.

Day of the week that families and friends in the survey state the missing person was last seen showed a more similar distribution to when the person was actually reported missing to police in the sample of police reports, rather than to when the person was reported last seen in the police reports. Given people in the survey were asked to recall an event occurring 18-24 months ago, it is possible that the day of the week that they made the report to police was more easily remembered and used to answer that question by some people. If that is the case, then the police report proportions, which did not show a significant peak day, may be a more accurate reflection of what day of the week people go missing on.

Time between last seen and police report

The time elapsed between when the person was last seen and when a missing person report is made varies, and may be due to a variety of factors. In some cases, as when a person is travelling overseas or interstate and there is no definite date of return or pre-arranged regular contact, it may be months between the time the person is last seen and date of report. In other cases, families may deliberately defer contacting police till the following day on the assumption that the missing person will return after a night away or will be located next day through the family's own search efforts.

Also, the time period is not necessarily the time that a person was known to be missing before police were called in, simply the time that the missing person was known to be last seen by the person making the report. For example, there are fears that a child is missing because he or she hasn't returned home from school. The parents may have reported the child missing

within an hour of the expected return time, but the child may have last been seen leaving home for school. Therefore it could be 10 hours between when the child was last seen and the report to police, but only 1 hour that the child was believed to be missing.

The practice in two jurisdictions of taking a missing person report over the telephone rather than requiring the report to be made in person at a police station will also affect the relevant time periods.

The following figures therefore need to be interpreted with caution. They will be affected in particular by different attitudes among families and friends as to when it is appropriate to call for police assistance and by individual circumstances such as expected contact time or return home by the missing person determining when the person was deemed to be missing. They may also be affected by police availability and reporting practices as to when a report is taken, as well as by recording practices as to when and how a report is entered onto computerised systems.

Based on the one-week sample of missing person reports (excluding persons reported missing from institutions), the person was last seen and reported missing on the same day in less than half the cases (44%). In 26% the person was last seen on the day before the date of the report being taken, in 13% the interval was 2 or 3 days, and in 7% it was 4 to 7 days. Overall, in 90% of cases the person was last seen (to the knowledge of the reporting person at the time of making the report) within one week of being reported missing to police.

In comparison, Hirshel & Lab's (1988) analysis found less than one day had elapsed before the report was made in 50% of cases and three days or more had elapsed in 13%. Hanfland, Keppel & Weis (undated) noted 86% of missing American children were reported within 24 hours.

When asked about the length of time the person was missing, families and friends of missing persons identified a period much longer than the dates between report and location recorded in police records. The average number of days between being reported as missing and as located on police records was 7.7 days, while the average time that the family or friend identified the person was missing was 15.9. This reflects in part the interval between the person last being seen and the time the family or friend made the police report as described above. For example, in one case a missing adult had left the home shared with another family member who had not wanted the mother to know of the disappearance. When the mother did find out one year later, she immediately reported to police, who located the missing son within one day. On police records, the person was reported and located in one day, but for the family, the person was missing for one year.

However, the different time intervals also reflect different perceptions about when a missing person stops being a missing person. While police records reflect locating the person, regardless of whether that person

returns home or not, some families consider their child still missing if he or she hasn't returned home to live, even though they have intermittent contact.

Relationship of person making the report

Based on the one-week sample of missing person reports (excluding persons reported missing from institutions where the reporting person was always a staff member), the reporting person was most commonly a member of the missing person's immediate family such as a parent, sibling, or spouse (76%). In 7% of cases the report was made by a non-family intimate, such as a friend, boyfriend/girlfriend, flatmate, neighbour, or workmate. In a small number of cases it was a grandparent, aunt, cousin or other extended family member (5%) or a foster parent or similar guardian relationship (6%). In 6% it was a professional relationship of some kind, most commonly landlord/tenant or school staff/student.

The survey of families and friends showed a higher proportion of cases where the reporting person was a member of the missing person's immediate family (87%) or extended family (9%), but also included people from the other groups, such as foster-parents, employers, and a leasing agent for the missing person.

Hirshel & Lab's (1988) analysis showed 65% reported by a parent, mainly the mother, and a further 24% by a spouse or other family member. In the NSW Police Service study of teenage runaways (Marcon 1995) 93% were reported missing by a parent.

Missing in company

In 44 cases (13%) of the one-week sample of missing person reports (excluding those reported missing from institutions) it was recorded that the missing person went missing with someone else. In some cases a separate missing person report was filed on that individual, and in others the details of those missing in company with the original missing person were also included in the one report. In half of those 44 cases, the relationship to the other missing persons was identified, most commonly as friends (14), own children (7), or another family member (3).

In 43 cases (16%) of missing persons reported in the survey of families and friends, the person went missing with others, although it is not always known whether the other person was also reported missing to police. Again, the relationship was most commonly identified as friends (62%), the missing person's own children (21%) or another family member (21%). Children and young people were more likely to go missing in company (20%) than adults (9%). Marcon (1995) reported 54% of teenage runaways going missing with a friend.

Reason for going missing

The survey asked families and friends of missing persons reported to police why they believed, at the time, that the person went missing, and also what explanation was given for the disappearance when the missing person was located. The responses grouped into four discrete categories, a miscellaneous 'other' group, a 'nonspecific' group where there was not enough information to discriminate between categories, and a none/not known group.

The first specific category covered reasons such as rebellion against parental authority, wanting to be independent, responding to peer pressure, and conflict over family rules. The second dealt with concerns over the safety of the missing person because of either self-harm or possible harm by others, such as fears that the person had suffered an accident, been abducted, suicided, or similar fears that 'something has happened to them'. The third category covered a range of circumstances where the common factor was that there was no intention on the part of the missing person to have gone missing. For example, there may have been confusion over times and arrangements about the missing person's return; people lost track of the time; simply forgot; didn't think to tell someone where they were; an elderly person wandered or became lost because of dementia. The fourth category covered circumstances where the person intentionally went missing to escape specific adverse circumstances such as financial problems, threat of violence, the discovery of the consequences of some illegal act committed, or to escape parental disciplinary action for truanting from school.

...In most cases a family member reported the person missing...

Table 9: Number of missing persons by reason given for going missing, based on the survey of families and friends of missing persons reported to police

	Reason believed at the time	Explanation given when located
Independence/ rebellion	57	64
Safety concerns	50	4
Unintentional	17	60
Escaping adverse consequences	29	32
Other	31	37
Non – specific	40	21
None/Don't know	46	52

...People often reported the person missing for safety concerns, but this was rarely the explanation for why they went missing...

However it excluded reasons such as avoiding general emotional distress, relationship or family pressures which were included in the other category.

The most common reason families and friends believed the person had gone missing and the most common explanation given afterwards was conflict about authority, rules or independent behaviour between the missing person and family. Not surprisingly, this independence/rebellion category accounted for 30% of reasons attributed for under 18 year olds at the time and 34% of explanations given when the child or young person was located.

At the time the person went missing, families and friends often feared for the safety of the missing person (19% of all cases) but the explanation given after being located rarely supported those concerns (1%). In about half those cases where safety concerns were cited as the reason believed at the time for the person going missing, the resulting explanation fell into the 'unintentional' category. Safety concerns predominated for adult missing persons (28%) as the possible reason at the time but the unintentional category accounted for almost half (45%) of explanations when the missing person was located (compared to only 11% for those under 18).

These proportions are consistent with Victoria Police 1996/97 annual statistics, where missing person reports include a statistical category of 'probable cause' completed by the officer at the time of taking the report. Categories such as domestic reasons or going missing of 'own accord' is recorded in police reports in two-thirds of cases, while categories comparable to the safety concern group above comprise a smaller percent (6%). Hirshel & Lab's (1988) analysis categorises 2% as taken by third party/in danger, compared to 59% in categories such as 'just went off' or 'habitual runaway' or 'adverse home conditions'.

Outcome

Location rates

Information on the number of missing persons reported was provided by each jurisdiction for the three years 1995 to 1997. However, the method used to compile these figures varies across States and Territories, and to obtain a consistently derived statistic would have required a very resource intensive manual count in some jurisdictions.

The location rates are fairly consistent across jurisdictions and over the three years at over 99%. Location figures can exceed 100% under calculation methods using a simple count of located reports to missing reports filed in that year, regardless of whether the location report refers to someone reported missing in the same year or previous years.

Only two people reported missing to police over the one-week sample of missing person reports in 1996 (excluding persons reported missing from institutions) were still missing in early 1998. In the survey of families and friends, two people (both adults) were

Table 10: Location rates 1995-1997 by jurisdiction

	1995	1996	1997
NSW	102.2%	96.3%	100.03%
VIC	99.4%	99.6%	98.5%
QLD	99.3%	99.3%	99.0%
WA	99.3%	99.1%	99.8%
SA	99.8%	99.9%	99.8%
TAS	102.2%	103.0%	95.5%
ACT	100.0%	99.9%	99.9%
NT	99.0%	98.1%	99.5%

NSW, TAS – number of location reports filed in each year regardless of the year the initial missing person report was lodged

VIC, QLD, SA, ACT, NT – number of missing persons reported in that year subsequently located to date

WA – reported minus estimated number of outstanding cases for the year calculated from monthly statistics by adding the monthly average of 'outstanding missing persons for the month' in that year and the difference between the number of outstanding longterm missing cases at the first and last month of each year

still listed as missing at the time of interview, some 18-24 months later. In one case a coroner's verdict had been given that the person was presumed dead, lost at sea. This gives a location rate of 99.4% and 99.3% respectively, similar to the overall location rates in each State and Territory over recent years. One person reported missing from an institution in the one-week sample of police reports was also still missing, giving a similar location rate (99.3%) for persons reported missing from institutions.

Not all jurisdictions routinely record whether the missing person is located safe and well. However it is assumed that the details of the missing person located report would be likely to include information if the missing person were located dead or ill enough to require hospitalisation. In the sample of one week's reports (excluding persons reported missing from institutions) seven were located dead, five apparently by suicide, one by drowning, and, in the remaining case, no apparent cause was recorded. Five cases recorded that the missing person was hospitalised when located. Two of these cases recorded the reason as a suicide attempt, one as a traffic accident, one as a possible drug overdose, and the remaining case noted only that the person was taken to hospital for observation.

In the survey of families and friends of missing persons, two people were located dead (in both cases the coroner determined the cause to be suicide) and another was recorded as still missing but presumed dead (lost at sea). All three were adults. Three missing people were physically unwell when located and required medical treatment, and two were hospitalised for mental health reasons (pre-existing conditions).

...Only two out of 505 cases reported missing to police were still missing 18 months later...

In the one week sample of missing person reports, no person reported missing from an institution was located dead. Two were admitted to hospital accident and emergency departments, one unconscious from an overdose of prescription drugs and no reason given in the second case.

This is comparable to available overseas figures. For example in Hirschel & Lab's (1988) analysis, 0.3% of missing persons located to police were located dead and three percent were still missing.

Length of time missing

In both the survey of families and friends and the one-week sample of missing person reports to police (excluding persons reported missing from institutions), nearly two-thirds of all missing persons were located on the same or next day of being reported to police (67% and 62% respectively).

Table 11: Time between reporting missing to police and located based on dates from police records confirmed by families and friends of missing persons in the survey or recorded in the sample of missing person reports (excluding missing from institutions)

	Survey*	Sample of reports*
same day	95	128
next day	72	91
2 – 3 days	33	42
4 – 7 days	31	24
7 – 30 days	19	24
31 days to 6 months	11	13
6 to 12 months	4	2
over 12 months	1	2
still missing	2	2
Total	268	328

* excludes 2 survey cases and 16 report sample cases where location date was not recorded or was not available

Within one week, 88% and 87% had been located in the two groups, and 95% and 93% located within one month. The average number of days between being reported to police and recorded on police records as located was 7.7 days for the survey group as a whole, averaging at 10.1 days for adults and 6.5 days for those under 18. This average figure will be skewed by the small number of cases missing for a long period of time. A slightly lower proportion of adults were located on the same or next day (58% compared to 64%) and fewer located within 1 month (90% and 96%).

These figures are consistent with annual statistical breakdowns available in some jurisdictions (which will include people reported missing from institutions). For example, in Victoria in 1996/97, time taken to locate the missing person was 1 or 2 days in 69% of cases, one week or less in 85%, less than 4 weeks in 95.1% and less than 6 months in 99.8%. The proportions were similar for adults and under 17 year olds. In NSW in 1997, 71% of missing persons were located in 3 days or under, 88% in 2 weeks or less, and 95% in under 60 days.

The findings are also consistent with statistics from other countries. For example, an American national incidence study (Finkelhor, Hotaling & Sedlak, 1990) found 50% of children and young people who ran away from home returned home within 2 days. Hirschel & Lab's (1988) analysis found 65% of people reported missing to police were missing for 3 days or less and 19% were missing for more than one week. However, only 8% of missing persons under 18 years old were missing more than 3 days compared to 21% of adults.

How located

In over half of both the one-week sample of missing person reports to police (excluding persons reported missing from institutions) and the survey of families and friends, the missing person returned or made contact of his or her own accord (52% and 42% respectively). Police located the missing person in 17% or 18% of cases respectively. Searching by families and friends located 17% of missing persons in the sample of one week's reports and 34% in the survey. The other category included being located by other agencies such as the Salvation Army or department responsible for youth services, brought to police after being arrested by store detectives, identified through immigration check, or through a variety of other miscellaneous means. A slightly higher proportion of adults returned or made contact than under 18 year olds (47% and 39% respectively), more children and young persons were located by family and friends than were adults (39% and 22%), but the proportions located by police or by other means were similar.

These different proportions between the survey of families and friends and the one-week sample of police reports may be due, at least in part, to the number of cases in the police reports where the specific manner of locating the missing person was not recorded (22% of reports). The police reports may consistently record cases where the missing person was located by police or where police were advised by families that the missing person had returned, simply because that information is more likely to be known to the officer making the report. Cases where the missing person was located by family searching or other means may simply not be known to the officer filing the report, and therefore the manner of location is not recorded, which would under-represent that category when percentages are calculated.

...Nearly two-thirds of all missing persons were located on the same or next day of being reported to police...

...In about half the cases the missing people returned or made contact of their own accord...

...Often 'putting out the word' was most helpful in locating them...

Table 12: Manner of locating the missing person as identified by families and friends of missing persons or recorded in the sample of missing person reports (excluding missing from institutions)

Manner of location	Survey*	Sample of reports*
Missing person returned or made contact	112	139
Located by police	89	70
Located by families or friends	49	46
Other	16	12
Total	266	267

* excludes 2 cases still missing in each group, 2 cases where the survey respondent couldn't specify how the person was located and 77 police reports where the manner of location is either not recorded or the information available is insufficient to discriminate between the coding categories

The survey of families and friends of missing persons also asked whether any information was particularly helpful in tracing the missing person. Of the 155 (57%) who identified that any particular thing was helpful, most mentioned knowing or finding out about the missing person's friends and places regularly frequented or 'putting out the word' that the person was missing. In a small number of cases (7) government information such as Department of Social Security records or information about the missing person's banking transactions was identified as particularly helpful.

These figures are similar to international studies such as Hirshel & Lab (1988), where 48% of reported missing persons returned of their own accord, 14% were found by police, and 7% were located by family or others. The remainder were either located but did not return, were not located, or the manner of locating them was not identified. Proportions in that analysis are similar for adults and people aged under 18. In the UK, 69% of youths returned home of their own accord (Abrahams & Mungall, 1992).

Where located

Missing person reports do not routinely identify where the missing person is located or, in the case of those returning, where they spent time while missing. An analysis of the text of the sample of one week's missing person reports could only identify information about where the person was located in 92 cases. This was considered to be too small a proportion of relevant cases for quantitative analysis.

The survey of families and friends provided information on where the missing person was found or had spent most of his or her time while missing where this was known to the respondent. In almost half of the 242 cases where the family or friend identified a location, the missing person was at a friend's home (30%) or with friends (17%). In one quarter (24%) of cases, some public place was identified, most commonly the streets, but also camping out, in parks, on beaches, at shops or entertainment centres, in church, or on public transport. In a small number of cases, the missing person was located at his or her own home (2%), a relative's home (3%), or someone else's home such as a family friend

or an unknown person (5%). The remaining 19% covered a diversity of locations including shelters or refuges (7 cases), caravan parks (6), hotels or motels (4), the missing person's or another person's car (10), and various other locations, as well as 5 cases where the person was travelling or on holiday.

These figures relate to where the missing person was located or had spent most of his or her time while missing. Other research has identified where missing persons are likely to go. An unpublished analysis by Kapiardis of 200 located missing persons in Victoria asked people for their destination when they went missing. One third (33.7%) stated they went to the home of a friend or relative or associate, 3% to a hotel or motel, and 7 went to some other location such as school, a refuge, or a hospital. However, over half of all cases (59%) stated the destination was 'street or public place'. Almost half (47%) of 11 to 18 year olds went to a friend's or relative's home, and females were more likely than males to do so. In the NSW Police Service survey of teenage runaways (Marcon, 1995), 64% stated they stayed at a house while missing while 27% said they stayed on the streets.

Most people in the Victorian study (80%) travelled less than 20 km from home, and almost all (95%) travelled less than 50 km from home, irrespective of age or gender. In the NSW survey of missing young people, 51% travelled less than 10 km from home (Marcon, 1995).

Summary

The missing person population is diverse across age groups (from infancy to over 100 years old), marital status and family circumstances, occupation, country of birth, living arrangements, and other characteristics often used to describe populations of interest. People go missing from a variety of places, at all times of the day and on all days of the week, and under widely different circumstances. A variety of reasons is given for why people going missing. The characteristics of the Australian missing person population reported to police, the circumstances under which people go missing, and location rates are generally consistent with those reported in international literature, in research by Australian police, and in police annual statistics.

...About half the time missing people stayed with friends while missing...

IMPACTS ON THE AUSTRALIAN COMMUNITY

Regardless of the characteristics of the missing person or the circumstances under which the person goes missing, there are impacts on families and friends, including health consequences, direct financial costs incurred, days lost from work or business, impacts on relationships and on routine activities and quality of life. The survey of families and friends of 270 persons reported missing to police provides information about the extent of these impacts in a sample selected to be representative of the missing person population as a whole, and comprising almost 1% of the total annual population. Further interviews with families and friends of missing persons who have been missing for extensive periods of time and have still not been located are used to show the extent of these impacts in what is, fortunately, a very small proportion of the total missing person population.

Health impacts

In 100 cases (37%), one or more people were identified by the person answering the survey questions as suffering some physical or mental health impact due to the missing person incident. A total of 145 different people were identified as suffering some impact on their health. In most cases, the health impact was considered by the survey respondent to be solely a consequence of the missing person incident. In some cases, there was a pre-existing condition but the missing person incident directly exacerbated that condition according to the survey respondent. People were asked to discriminate between the specific effects of the missing person incident and any other matters that might have impacted on the health of any person identified. Wherever possible, the results excluded all health impacts except those directly attributed by the survey respondent to the missing person incident.

The most common health impacts were stress-related symptoms, often severe enough to warrant medical attention. These included migraines, chest pains, cramps, vomiting, significant sleep loss, weight loss, and severe inability to concentrate. In all cases the respondent confirmed the severity or extent of such symptoms clearly affected the health of the person concerned. Less severe stress-related symptoms, or where the person stated that the impacts were more emotional effects than health related, were not included here.

Examples of existing conditions exacerbated by the missing person incident include: a mother hospitalised for several days for angina, a father's aggravated stomach ulcer, asthma attacks that

permanently worsened a brother's condition, delayed recovery in a woman with leukemia, two week's psychiatric hospitalisation for depression and suicide concerns by another mother, and an early birth in a pregnant friend who reported the missing person. In 23 cases (9%) the missing person was identified as one of the people suffering some health impact.

In total, the missing person incident was associated (and attributed either in part or full) with one or more people seeking medical attention from a general practitioner or a medical specialist or being hospitalised in 63 cases (23%). This does not include another 16 cases where support was sought only from a counsellor or psychologist but it was not clear whether this was for a specific health condition or dealt with matters such as relationship, family or school problems. In most cases medical attention was covered under health care arrangements and therefore not a significant direct cost to families and friends. However, in a number of cases families and friends bore the costs of counselling sessions.

Respondents were also asked to distinguish how many people had suffered a major health impact. In 60 of the 270 missing person cases (22%) one or more people were considered by the respondent to have suffered a major, not just any, health impact. Those 60 cases included 77 separate people.

Interviews with nominated families and friends of missing persons that were not part of the survey show ongoing health impacts in those cases where the person is still missing. For example, one woman was hospitalised for depression because of her husband's disappearance, and received psychiatric treatment for two years. She stated she was totally suicidal at the time and reported months of rejecting and being unable to care for her young children without help.

Impacts on work or business

In 131 cases (49%), one or more people were identified by the person answering the survey as incurring an impact on their work or business due to the missing person incident. A total of 186 separate people were identified as suffering some work impact. The most common effect was time off work, usually one to three days, although in a very small number of cases (4) this extended to several months. Because of the effect of those cases with lengthy time off work, the average number of days across the 141 different people losing some time off work or business was 6 days. However, 83% of those who took time off work lost 3 days or less.

...In about one-third of cases someone's physical or mental health was affected...

...The most common health impacts were stress-related symptoms, often severe enough to warrant medical attention...

...About half the time someone's work or business was affected...

...In almost every case one or more people were emotionally affected, often dramatically...

Thirteen people (including the missing person in some cases) lost or quit their jobs as a direct result of the missing person incident or its immediate consequences. Although thirty of the 186 people incurring a work impact did not take actual time off work, the respondents stated their work performance suffered significantly because of severe concentration problems or because of disruption to their work activities associated with the search for the missing person.

Other work related impacts included: the extra expense of hiring additional staff to cover self-employed family members' absences from their business while searching or coping with the emotional distress of the incident in four cases; legal costs to a leasing agent to deal with the missing person's business assets in one instance; and several weeks of voluntary work lost in one case.

In 12 cases (5%) the missing person was identified as one of the people incurring some work impact, although this is likely to under-represent the actual situation, because only the information known to the person answering the survey was included. In a number of instances the respondent stated they thought the missing person must have missed substantial time off work but were unable to confirm this was actually the case or to specify the time involved. These cases were not included in this analysis.

In most cases the time taken off work did not incur a wage loss because it was taken under sick leave or other leave arrangements. However, some families and friends were financially disadvantaged through lost wages, work missed by the self-employed or loss of bonus entitlements. Overall 39 of the 141 who lost time off work or business suffered a wage or income loss. In addition, the 13 people who quit or lost work would have incurred varying degrees of immediate and ongoing income loss.

Respondents were asked to distinguish how many people had suffered a major work impact. In 56 of the 270 missing person cases (21%) one or more people were considered by the respondent to have suffered a major, not just any, work impact. Those 56 cases included 92 separate people. Major impacts were generally distinguished from any impact on the basis of financial loss or length of time taken off work or actual job loss.

Interviews with nominated families and friends of missing persons that were not part of the survey show ongoing work impacts in those cases where the person is still missing. For example one woman stopped work for two years to devote herself full-time to the search for her missing daughter.

Impacts on quality of life and routine activities

In 253 cases (94%), one or more people were identified by the person answering the survey as suffering an impact on their quality of life or disruption to their routine activities due to the missing person incident. A total of 1647 separate people were

identified as suffering some level of impact in this area. An average number of 6 people for every missing person in the survey were identified by the respondent as being affected, although the actual number identified as affected in some way ranged from none to 90 across the survey.

The most common effect was significant disruption to family routines or activities because of searching for the missing person. Common examples of disruption to routine activities included: late nights or disturbed sleep; takeaway, irregular or no meals; time off school for other siblings; extended family members leaving their own homes to babysit other children or comfort distressed parents. Examples of quality of life impacts included other children's emotional needs being ignored, curtailed social and leisure pursuits, missing a school graduation. An intangible consequence not mentioned directly but implied in some cases was the time lost for other family or social or personal activities during the time families and friends are involved in searching for the missing person.

Respondents were asked to distinguish how many people had suffered a major impact. In 115 of the 270 missing person cases (42%) one or more people were considered by the respondent to have suffered a major, not just any, impact on quality of life or routine activities. Those 115 cases included 364 separate people. An example of major impact was two cases where elderly grandparents ended up with permanent responsibility for the care of the missing person's handicapped child.

Interviews with nominated families and friends of missing persons that were not part of the survey also show dramatic and ongoing impacts on quality of life in those cases where the person is still missing. For example, one father stated that his entire life had changed permanently. His work, activities, and relationships were subordinated to the search for his missing daughter for years. He states he now feels uncomfortable and restricts his going out in public because of people's reaction to him.

Emotional impacts

In almost every case (99%), one or more people were identified as suffering an emotional impact due to the missing person incident. A total of 3116 separate people were identified as suffering some level of impact in this area. An average number of 12 people for every missing person in the survey were identified by the respondent as being affected in some way, although the actual number ranged from none to hundreds.

The most common emotions reported were anxiety or worry (identified for 418 people), non-specific emotional upset or trauma (223), concern (173), anger (91) and depression or sadness (78). However a very wide range of emotional reactions were identified including guilt, emotional withdrawal, confusion, shame or embarrassment, feelings of helplessness, frustration, shock and hatred. Also, 91 people reported physical stress symptoms similar to those

...In almost every case someone's quality of life or routine was affected...

identified by other respondents as health impacts but of a lesser severity.

Respondents were asked to distinguish how many people had suffered a major emotional impact. In 198 of the 270 missing person cases (73%) one or more people were considered by the respondent to have suffered a major, not just any, emotional impact. Those 198 cases included 668 separate people.

Interviews with nominated families and friends of missing persons that were not part of the survey also show dramatic and ongoing emotional impacts in those cases where the person is still missing. For example one woman identified over 50 people affected emotionally, half in a major way, and for many of those family, friends, and work colleagues of the missing person affected, this emotional impact is still ongoing today - several years afterwards.

Relationship impacts

In 58% of cases, the survey respondent stated one or more relationships were affected in some way because of the missing person incident. In the majority of these 154 cases (76%), people stated the effect was ongoing. In 94 cases, the relationships affected included those between the missing person and other people, most commonly the immediate family but also extending to friends and work colleagues. In 72 cases the relationships impacted upon were between family members other than the missing person, most commonly between the two parents or between a natural parent and the relevant step-parent. In 16 cases they included relationships between the survey respondent and people outside the family, most commonly between the mother and her friends or current partner.

Common examples of relationship impacts from the survey included: a permanent breakdown of trust between the missing person and parents; arguments between parents resulting, in several cases, in separation; a breakdown in the relationship between a single parent and new partner; and hostility and anger toward the missing person from siblings.

Interviews with nominated families and friends of missing persons that were not part of the survey also show a variety of ongoing relationships impacts in those cases where the person is still missing. For example, one man whose sister is still missing cites a total breakdown of the relationship with his own parents from the time of the incident. He maintains regular contact with his parents only so that his children will have contact with their grandparents.

Economic impacts

Families and friends reported economic impacts in many areas, including loss of earnings or work-related benefits, health-related costs, property loss or damage, legal costs, but particularly costs associated with searching for the missing person. In almost every case (97%) the family or friends of the missing person

conducted some level of searching. This ranged from making phone calls to people or places to locate the missing person to organising comprehensive searches by over 80 extended family members. Estimated costs associated with searches ranged from the cost of several local phone calls only through to thousands of dollars incurred in travel and accommodation expenses for several extensive searches of areas where the missing person may have gone.

Table 13: Estimated costs directly incurred in searching for the missing person by families and friends of 270 missing persons reported to police

Estimated costs incurred	No. of cases*
\$0	12
\$1 – \$100	213
\$101 – \$200	20
\$201 – \$500	17
\$501 – \$1000	4
\$1001 – 5000	2
Over \$5000	1

*excludes one case (lost at sea) where it was not possible to estimate costs

Most people in the survey (83%) incurred less than \$100 in costs of searching for the missing person. A smaller number spent more substantial amounts, up to \$7,000 in one case.

Personal search costs can be very high in cases where the person is missing over a long period of time, as shown in interviews with nominated families and friends of missing persons that were not part of the survey. For example, one family spent approximately \$50,000 in their search for a son missing overseas.

Other impacts

Other issues also create significant problems and/or costs. One is the legality of the use and disposal of a missing person's property. For example, in one case in the survey, it was the leasing agent who reported the person missing to police, as the missing person had been living at his business's commercial premises for some months after a marital separation. The leasing agent was obliged to take legal action to dispose of the missing person's property, at a cost of \$2,000 in legal fees and considerable personal time.

Other instances have been highlighted in interviews with families of missing persons who have been missing for lengthy periods of time. For example, one woman whose husband went missing after making arrangements with a solicitor to give her ongoing power of attorney to deal with various properties purchased, suffered significant financial

...In over half the cases relationships were affected and this was often an ongoing impact...

..In almost every case family and friends did their own searching sometimes at substantial financial cost...

loss because these legal arrangements had apparently not been properly drawn up.

Apart from legal expenses, other costs commonly identified in the survey (7 cases) were theft of money or property from the family in order to go missing (\$600 from a mother's credit card in one instance) and the costs of retrieving or relocating the missing person when found (12). Other types of costs included the installation of home security to prevent future recurrence (4), maintaining the missing person's property (2), or loss or theft of the missing person's property because of exploitation while missing (3). In two cases, the disappearance of the missing person resulted in grandparents taking permanent care of the missing person's child, with all the associated costs but, in one case, being ineligible to receive benefits for the care of the handicapped grandchild. In one case, the missing person spent time at a police station for 3 days until parents had driven nearly a thousand kilometres to retrieve the two teenagers who had stolen one parent's car to drive interstate.

In 13 cases the respondent identified that the missing person had suffered an education impact (losing significant time from school, leaving school permanently, poor exam performance, or losing a university place or a school scholarship because of the missing person incident).

Not all impacts were considered negative ones by respondents. In a small number of cases, they

identified positive impacts, stating that the missing person had learnt from the experience to, for example, make contact if staying away, or had become more aware of the dangers involved. However, more often respondents stated that the experience had taught the missing person negative things, such as the confidence and street survival skills to go missing again (or to manipulate the family by threatening to do so) and that this had undermined parental authority and destabilised family relationships.

Impacts on clients of non-police tracing services

While these specific impacts were identified in surveys with people reported missing to police, the same types of impacts were identified for clients by case workers in each of the three non-police tracing services, even though the circumstances triggering the disappearance were generally different. These impacts can compound the trauma of people who may have already suffered other extreme circumstances throughout their lives, such as torture, rape, deprivation, and physical suffering associated with war and conflict.

It was not possible within this study to quantify the impacts on families and friends of clients or the three non-police tracing services through a representative survey. The following case examples have been provided by the agencies to illustrate the experiences of their client group.

Figure 2: Case studies provided by non-police tracing services

Case study 1: Australian Red Cross client

A woman was separated during World War 2 from her only surviving parent and sibling. During the course of the war she experienced torture and rape by soldiers. She migrated to Australia after the war, married and raised a family. She lived with the uncertainty of not knowing what had happened to her family but had not attempted to trace them because of concerns about repercussions for the family from Eastern European authorities. However, with the change in the political environment in recent years she decided to attempt to trace her relatives. As a result she found that her parent and sibling survived World War 2 but died in the intervening years.

Issues identified by her case worker, which are considered typical of many similar cases in the agency's client group, include:

- Trauma arising from war experiences;
- Isolation as a new migrant;
- Re-traumatisation within a new country;
- Living with uncertainty regarding the fate of her family members;
- Balancing the demands of every day realities with the uncertainty surrounding the fate of her family member; and
- Not having the opportunity to say goodbye to her family.

Case Study 2: Australian Red Cross client

A young woman was separated from her parents and some of her siblings in 1992, during the Somali conflict. She survived alone in Somalia as a teenager and came to Australia shortly thereafter. Until 1997, she did not know if her family was alive or where they were living. She had no family in Australia and did not wish to have any strong links with the Somali community.

In 1997, she received a letter from her father, who found her whereabouts through Somali community contacts. She knew the letter was from her family, who she had not seen for five years and was overjoyed at finally receiving contact. However, whilst the letter contained the welcome news that some of her family were still alive, it also contained news that the family members were living in poor circumstances in refugee camps in Kenya and that her mother had received serious burns to her body, following a fire in one of the camps. Her father asked her about the other siblings who were still missing. The young woman did not know how to tell her father that she saw these siblings killed. She has found the family separation greatly impacts on her ability to concentrate, study and socialise.

Issues identified by her case worker include:

- The impact of not knowing the whereabouts of missing family members, including isolation and loss of identity caused by not knowing whether you have any family left alive;
- The expectations of re-establishing contact, including how to relate one's own refugee experience and how to share bad news about the fate of other family members;
- The guilt over the standard of living in Australia when knowing the dangers facing family overseas; and
- That there can also be serious implication of this sort of separation on the family reunification: the impact of months or years of separation on the relationship; the loss of status, income, independence and roles and how this impacts on family relationships; the ability of individuals to cope with the psychological consequences of the refugee experience in their partners; and the varying capacity of individuals to resettle.

Case Study 3: Salvation Army

A 65 year old man had been placed in a home by his parents when he was nine and effectively abandoned by his family until his carer initiated a request with the Salvation Army on the man's behalf to locate some family members. Apparently, the manager had discovered two younger sisters listed on the mother's certificate. One sister was located. She had been unaware of her brother's existence. The family had apparently never spoken of him after placing him in a home and, when the sister had asked about a photograph she found, was told that he had died.

The sister has now made contact with her brother and visits him on a regular basis. Her husband's family has claimed him as their own. His health has improved as well as his behaviour and he has reached the stage where his doctors have been able to decrease his medication.

Issues identified in this case include:

- Health and behaviour impacts for the missing person manifested in improved health when discovering a family, implying the absence of family contact and support may have had ongoing negative effects on his health and functioning for much of his life;
- Emotional impacts on the sister especially anger that her own family had never told her of her brother's existence, and relationship impacts that could have been avoided or reduced if contact had been established between them earlier; and
- Economic impacts for the community in that his medication levels and possibly the intensity of hospitalised care could have been reduced if earlier contact were established.

Case Study 4: Salvation Army

A man initiated a request to try to locate his mother from whom he was separated when the Big Brother Movement sent him and his brother to Australia from the UK. Both boys were given to believe their mother was dead and that they had no living relatives in the UK. Through the efforts of Salvation Army officers he was put in contact with his mother and spent time with her and his half brothers, overjoyed that he now had a family that he could relate to and that his own children, although adults, had a grandmother.

Issues identified in this case include:

- The long period of time that can be involved in such separations between children and parents, and therefore

...For every case of a missing person reported to police, an average of 12 people are affected in some way...

the extensive periods of time that people live with the uncertainty and the attendant emotional consequences of not knowing whether a close family member is alive;

- The impact on others not directly involved in the separation, such as the man's children growing up without contact with, or knowledge of, their grandparent; and
- The economic costs that would have to be borne if an individual did not have recourse to assistance from tracing agencies and had to rely on personal searching for people missing overseas.

Case Study 5: International Social Service

After being abducted by his father at age 7, told his mother was dead, taken to Australia to live and subsequently abandoned at age 12, the now 35 year old man attempted to find out whether his mother was still alive. He reported himself missing to police, on the basis that someone must have reported him missing somewhere and this action might bring leads about where he came from. International Social Service became involved and the mother was located overseas. The two have now been reunited after 28 years separation.

Issues identified in this case include:

- Decades of ongoing emotional distress for the mother;
- For the man concerned, a childhood and early adulthood feeling wretched, lonely and ignored, and rebelling, living a nomadic street life and exposed to the potential risks of such a life as a teenager; and
- Decades of lost family relationships, not only between mother and child but with half-siblings and other family.

Summary

In summary, families and friends (and in some cases missing persons themselves) suffer significant health, work, quality of life, emotional, relationship, economic, and other impacts associated with the missing person incident. For every case of a missing person reported to police, an average of at least 12 people are affected in some way, either emotionally, by health or employment related impacts, effects on quality of life or on relationships, or a combination of some or all of these. Similar impacts have been described by case workers in the three non-police tracing services. Therefore while the number of people reported missing to police or to the three non-police tracing agencies is about 30,000 per year, a very conservative estimate of the number of people affected each year is over a third of a million. For some of these people the impact is ongoing for years and even decades.

COSTS TO THE AUSTRALIAN COMMUNITY

The economic, health, social and productivity costs to the Australian community associated with missing persons are many and varied. This part of the research is based on a number of sources. They include extrapolation of the results from the survey of families and friends of 270 missing persons reported to police, effectively one percent of the annual missing person population. They include consultations with government and non-government organisations and community groups through which estimates of resource impacts on those agencies were developed. They also include findings from relevant Australian and international research and statistics available from sources such as the Australian Bureau of Statistics and the Steering Committee for the Review of Commonwealth/State Service Provision. Wherever available, quantitative data provided by an agency has been used. However, in many cases the costing is based on subjective estimates made by key individuals in those agencies. In some cases it was simply not possible to provide a quantitative estimate.

Costs associated with locating missing persons reported to police

Location costs incurred by police

All police services have a dedicated missing persons unit or function, generally responsible for coordination, recording, and some degree of investigation of missing person cases. In most cases, general duties police are tasked with searching for the missing person, so that any resource assessment needs to include both the dedicated missing person function and a component of general duties police officer time.

On the basis of figures provided by each police service, the full-time equivalent number of staff dedicated to the missing person function in missing person units across Australia is 38.4. However, the responsibility for taking reports and making inquiries to locate missing persons generally rests with officers at station level. Missing persons unit officers may provide specialist tracing support or undertake or coordinate specific investigations or provide a liaison point for families and friends of missing persons.

It is estimated, based on consultations with police officers at station level in several jurisdictions and subsequently confirmed with every jurisdiction, that the majority of missing person cases take an average of two hours by officers other than those in missing

person units. This covers time to take the initial report, make preliminary inquiries, and take whatever follow-up action is necessary when the person is located. This estimate applies to that proportion of cases that are located within several days and do not involve extensive police search action.

Cases where a person is missing for longer will involve more police time by general duties officers to make more detailed inquiries, following up sources of information, and visiting possible locations where the missing person may be found. This normally involves two officers where made by officers on routine patrols, so that each hour of inquiry will involve two hours of officer time. In other cases, circumstances may dictate an immediate area search involving a large number of officers (for example, where a child may have wandered off in bushland in inclement weather). A very subjective estimate of 20 hours for these sorts of cases was applied.

In a very small number of special cases, substantial police time may be applied to a single case. Every officer consulted stated it was impossible to give an accurate estimate of the average time devoted to this smaller number of cases because they varied so markedly. Examples cited included one officer dedicating over 200 hours in a 15 month period to a single missing person case, and other instances where a bushland search involved hundreds of police hours in one week alone. The current NSW taskforce into the Newcastle disappearances will calculate to a massive number of police hours for each of the missing person cases being investigated. A very subjective estimate of an average of 100 hours (or the equivalent of 12.5 total officer days) per case was applied to such cases.

Based on length of time between being reported missing and located, it is estimated 90% of all missing person cases reported would fall into the first category, 9.5% in the second, and 0.5% (or less than 3 per week across Australia) into the third. This calculates to 119,650 hours per year to locate missing persons in addition to the 38.4 officers in the State or Territory's missing person unit.

The Criminal Justice Commission (1997) has recently calculated the cost of first response policing to be 82 cents per officer per minute (comprising 63 cents for labour costs and 19 cents for operating and capital costs) plus 3 cents running cost per vehicle per minute. Using this figure, the estimated 119,650 hours of time spent on locating missing persons by officers other than those in missing person units calculates at \$6.1 million for 28,500 missing persons reported per year, or an average cost of \$214.11 per missing person case.

Costs of operating missing persons units in each State and Territory also need to be included. Staff levels range from Administrative Support Officer to Senior Sergeant. Senior Constable level represents a reasonable midpoint (around \$40,000 per annum across States and Territories). Corporate overheads also need to be added to take into account capital and recurrent costs of operating these units and other corporate costs. The Commonwealth Department of Finance (1991) in its 'Guidelines for Costing of Government Activity' suggests an overhead rate of 154.4% loading on direct annual salaries to cover labour on-costs and all administrative expenses. Applying a 154% loading to an annual salary of \$40,000 gives a total cost of \$3.9 million per annum, or \$136.89 per missing person case to cover the cost of officers dedicated to the missing function in central units.

Search costs incurred by agencies assisting police

In a small but significant number of cases, agencies assist police by providing resources for specific searches, especially where the missing person may be lost at sea or in bushland. This includes a range of government departments and other agencies, such as Australian Search and Rescue (AusSAR), State Emergency Services (SES), the Australian Customs Service through Coastwatch, as well as local community groups such as surf and life saving clubs or fire service volunteers. In one example, a three day search of bushland for a missing person involved over 400 searchers in total, including SES volunteers, bushfire services volunteers, ambulance teams, local government, and officers from the various government departments responsible for land and water management, conservation, and mining. One jurisdiction estimated SES are called on to assist in searching for a missing person about once a week, usually involving a team of 5 to 10 officers for 16 hours. AusSAR provided three examples where the organisation was requested to assist in the search for a missing person reported to police. Direct costs of the air searches to AusSAR were \$62,000, \$91,000 for a two-day search, and \$151,213 for a search over 3 days. The cost of SES staff and volunteer time was not included.

The survey of families and friends of missing persons included two cases of bush searches and one lost-at-sea incident involving SES and AusSAR respectively. A very subjective estimate was applied based on an estimate of direct costs of \$5,000 for a bush search and \$90,000 to AusSAR for a sea search. Days work lost to the business or public sector are estimated at an average of 1.5 workdays for 10 SES and other non-police officers and volunteers searchers per incident (costed at \$184.10 per work-day lost). This gives a figure of \$108,285 for these three cases or \$401.05 per missing person case across the survey. No salary loss by volunteers is included and costs of police resources were covered earlier.

Search costs incurred in locating Australians reported missing overseas

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and its consular services assist Australians in locating families and friends missing overseas. In many of the estimated 1,200 requests per year to DFAT to locate travellers overseas, the Department will make its own inquiries through its consular services. Those costs have not been included in the study because they do not necessarily involve a person being reported to police, and therefore fall outside the scope of the research. However, in some cases DFAT will seek assistance from the Australian Federal Police's Overseas Liaison Officer Network or the National Response Centre (the liaison point for Interpol). Under new arrangements recently implemented, this will involve a missing person report made directly to the Australian Federal Police. Under arrangements at the time period covered by the survey, families and friends made a report through the relevant State or Territory police service. The survey includes one case of a person reported missing overseas. Costs to the State or Territory police service would be covered in earlier analyses, while AFP and DFAT costs were not.

The cost to DFAT and AFP in any individual overseas missing person case will vary dramatically depending on the country the person is reported missing, the circumstances under which he or she went missing, and the associated degree of concern for that person's safety and welfare. Time involved by departmental officers in Australia and consular staff overseas (but excluding time spent by the local authorities) can range from one or two hours to months. For example, a single case of a person still missing overseas has involved an estimated minimum of the equivalent of 325 working days by DFAT and AFP officers to date. A very subjective estimate of an average of 10 hours DFAT and AFP officer time was used as the basis for costing for this study (at an average salary of \$40,000 per annum plus 154% corporate overhead loading). This calculates at \$521 for the single case identified in the survey or \$2.11 across all missing persons in the survey.

Search costs incurred by departments and institutions with specific client responsibilities

Where the person goes missing from an institution or is the responsibility of a government department (eg a child who is a ward of the state) that department or institution may also incur costs through its own searches, even though the person has been reported as missing to police. For example, youth workers or other officers of the State or Territory department responsible for child and youth services may, in some cases, as well as reporting the person missing to police, attempt to locate a missing child or young person directly. In NSW, for example, King's Cross Adolescent Services play a very active role in locating children and young persons believed to have gone missing to that area. It was not possible to provide a reliable cost estimate for this component.

Search costs incurred by families and friends themselves

In almost all cases the family or friend actively searched for the missing person, predominantly by phoning and driving around the local area or places where the missing person was thought to be located. In some instances, large numbers of friends and associates were involved. In others, only one or several immediate family members searched, but the search extended to several days and nights, or in some cases, weeks.

In a number of cases, people could not identify a specific amount. However there was sufficient description of the sorts of search activities undertaken to make a reasonable approximation based on precise costs given by other families doing similar levels of searching. In many cases costs were expressed as a range or maximum amount (eg under \$20 or between \$100 and \$200). An average cost was calculated using the midpoint of each of the cost categories in Table 14, except for the over \$5000 category where the actual amount specified in that case (\$7000) was used. This contributes a total of \$34,600 or an average of \$128.15 for every missing person in the survey.

Costs of inquiries of agency records to trace missing person movements

Government departments, non-government organisations, and some privatised agencies hold information that may be accessed by police, and in some instances by non-police tracing agencies or individuals themselves. Such agencies could locate the missing person's whereabouts, confirm that the missing person is alive, or pass on a message from concerned family and friends.

Useful sources have been identified as banks and financial institutions where the missing person holds an account or credit card, Medicare records in case the missing person has used health services, the Department of Social Security through which the missing person may be receiving a benefit or allowance. Other agency records such as telephone, water, and electricity service providers, licence and vehicle registration authorities, rental bond and housing services, or taxation records may provide information about a missing person's new address. Immigration and customs records may hold information about movement of the missing person in and out of Australia. In long-term missing cases, Births Deaths and Marriages records may be accessed for information about name changes.

Each inquiry incurs some cost to the particular agency. In some cases that cost is absorbed by the agency, in others there may be a fee charged for the service. In either case, there is a cost to the Australian community.

In some instances, the inquiry may come from the family or friend of the missing person directly. For example, hospital casualty departments may be contacted to ascertain whether the missing person has been admitted because of an accident or injury or for an ongoing condition. For example, one capital city public hospital's patient inquiry area received on

average 26 calls per week specifically mentioning that the caller was searching for a missing person. The estimated length of time per call was estimated to be 2-3 minutes, calculating to an average of one hour per week for that hospital. If a similar rate could be assumed across the majority of the approximately 600 public acute care hospitals in Australia, there is clearly a resource impact in this one area alone.

It was not possible to quantify a reliable cost estimate for this component.

Costs contributed by businesses and community groups towards locating missing persons

Some community organisations operate specific initiatives to help locate missing persons, for example, Rotary's LAMP (Lost and Missing Persons) initiative. The commercial and business sector may sponsor regular or one-off initiatives in this area, such as sponsoring Missing Persons Week activities. In one case identified in interviews with families and friends, a prominent businessman was approached by the mother of a missing person for financial support to locate and bring home her daughter from interstate and he funded the relevant travel costs. It was not possible to quantify a reliable cost estimate for this component.

National Missing Persons Unit

The National Missing Persons Unit (NMPU) provides direct operational support in locating missing people. This includes both investigative support through the provision of ViCLAS services for outstanding missing person cases and the development and coordination of national initiatives to help locate missing persons such as national posters and Missing Persons Week. While a proportion of the NMPU budget should ideally be apportioned across other areas as well (such as the policy and coordination or prevention components of this cost analysis) the total budget has been included in full in this area for the purpose of this cost analysis. This calculates to \$6.49 per missing person case.

Costs associated with return of a located missing person

In some cases, there is a direct and sometimes significant cost incurred when the missing person is located. Examples include: the government department responsible for a ward of the State located in another jurisdiction covering the costs of flying that State ward home, family members travelling interstate to retrieve a missing teenager, or private companies offering return home programs such as the Home Free scheme operated by Greyhound/Pioneer Australia. Sometimes these costs extend to relocating the missing person from the original place they went missing from. Examples include arranging an alternative foster placement in the case of a missing child or moving an elderly person missing because of the onset of dementia from his or her own home to live with another relative or to an institution immediately upon return. It was not possible to quantify a reliable cost estimate for this component.

...The search-related costs to the individuals concerned and to the Australian community as a whole exceed \$25.3 million per year...

Media and publicity costs to help locate a missing person

Some families and friends may place advertisements in newspapers, incurring direct costs. In most cases, media publicity is at no charge to the individual but does incur costs for the media organisations. In some cases, such as during Missing Persons Week, there may be substantial media coverage to help locate outstanding missing cases. Direct costs to families and friends are included under search costs by families and friends. Other costs in this area have not been quantified.

Summary of location costs

Table 14 summarises the costs associated with locating missing persons reported to police and provides an estimated cost per missing person.

On the assumption that the survey of families and friends of 270 missing persons is representative of the total missing person population reported to police each year, the search-related costs to the individuals concerned and to the Australian community as a whole exceed \$25.3 million per year. This is a conservative estimate.

Employment-related costs associated with persons reported missing to police

Loss of earnings for lost time off work or business

The survey of families and friends of missing persons identified 843 days lost from work or business

associated with the missing person episode. Predominantly, this related to time lost by families and friends, but, in some cases where the information was known to the survey respondent, it also included time lost by the missing person. In most cases there was no direct loss of earnings to the person concerned because the time was taken under leave entitlement or other arrangements that did not usually involve a direct financial loss except in a small number of cases involving loss of shift penalty or some bonus payment. However, for about one-third of the time lost, a direct earning loss was identified.

The loss to the individual of time off work (ie direct earning loss by employees and the self-employed) is estimated at \$73,454 across the survey of 270 missing persons. This averages at \$272.05 for every missing person regardless of whether anyone lost earnings for time off work in that particular case.

Industry and public sector costs of lost work days

In cases where the person taking time off work did so under paid leave arrangements of some kind, there is no direct cost to the person but still an indirect cost to the business sector or, in the case of public sector employees, to the community. This is a difficult area to cost directly, and varies according to what assumptions are made as to appropriate areas to include and about underlying costs in each area.

Research by the National Institute of Labour Studies (Wooden 1995) identified key elements to be taken into account. These are the value of lost output, the cost of employer coping strategies such as overtime premia or cost of hiring temporaries, additional training

Table 14: Estimated location costs per missing person incident

Location costs	Estimated cost per missing person case
Police location costs	\$351.00
National Missing Persons Unit costs	\$6.49
Search costs for families and friends	\$128.15
Other agency search costs in assisting police	\$401.05
Additional costs of persons reported missing overseas	\$2.11
Search costs to departments with specific client responsibilities	Not costed
Costs of inquiries into agency records	Not costed
Businesses and community contributions to locating missing persons	Not costed
Costs associated with return of a located missing person	Not costed
Media and publicity costs to help locate a missing person	Not costed
Total estimated cost per missing person	\$888.80

or supervision costs associated with hiring temporary employees, adverse impacts on output quality, and adverse impacts on coworkers such as increased stress or decline in morale. Some of these components are obviously difficult to quantify reliably. Wooden (1992) calculated the cost for time off work in Australia based on: the cost of sick leave paid to the absent employee; incremental cost of any overtime worked; incremental cost of hiring and training additional casual or temporary labour; and the cost of deliberately overstaffing in expectation of regular absences. Adjusting for increased average earnings between the period that estimate was made and now gives a figure of \$184.10 per day's work lost.

Where time is taken off work on paid leave, this represents a cost to the business or public sector. Where time off work is not covered as paid leave, family members or friends or the missing persons themselves will lose earnings that can be directly costed. However, there is also a residual cost to the business or public sector of approximately 20.9% (based on the difference between the cost estimate of \$184.10 to industry and average earnings).

Overall, an estimated 843 days were lost from work or business of which 568 were on paid leave and the remainder involved a salary loss by employees or were days lost by the self-employed, which have both been costed previously. The loss to the business and public sector (based on full cost of paid leave and residual cost of unpaid leave) is estimated at \$114,813, averaging at \$425.23 for every missing person regardless of whether anyone lost time off work in that particular case.

Where searches involve SES or other volunteers, those people may lose time off work and in some cases could incur financial loss. Regardless, there would be industry and public sector costs incurred because those searchers were not engaged in their usual employment. It was not possible to establish a separate cost estimate for this impact.

Productivity loss through impaired work performance

In a number of cases, respondents to the survey specifically stated that, although they did not take any time off work, their work performance was significantly affected by poor concentration or effects of stress resulting from the missing person incident. Such productivity loss should be factored into the assessment of work impacts, but is obviously difficult to quantify. For the purpose of this study, a subjective estimate of 20% average productivity loss was applied. Thirty people specifically identified impaired work performance, although it is likely that, if questioned directly on this issue, many others would also have done so. Taking a very conservative estimate of one day's productivity loss for each of those 30 people at 20% of average earnings adds \$865 to the survey identified employment costs, or \$3.20 per missing person case.

In a small number of cases, families and friends were self-employed and incurred further costs. Some were required to hire others to operate the business. Others stated they could make up time later, but their business can be considered as having incurred a productivity loss. In a small number of cases, there were significant impacts attributable, at least in part if not full, to the missing person incident. In one case, a \$38,000 money market trading loss was attributed to impaired work performance because of worry over the missing person. Whilst these costs are incurred in only a small number of cases, they can be extremely high. A conservative loading of \$10 was imputed per case to take account of these infrequent but very costly other expenses.

Loss of employment

In 13 cases, missing people or family members lost jobs or felt obliged to leave a job, for example, to move interstate to be with the missing person when located, or because the missing person had acted as childminder and other arrangements could not be made. Financial impacts can include immediate and/or ongoing loss of earnings for those affected. They include costs to the previous employer in recruiting, selecting, and training a replacement, as well as any loss of production of goods and services. They also include direct and indirect costs to government discussed in later sections.

The study did not collect the detailed information about length of time not employed, immediate earning loss, differential between previous and subsequent earnings, and so on that would allow an accurate cost estimate of direct costs to people losing or quitting their jobs. Employer direct and indirect costs are also difficult to quantify. A very subjective estimate of costs to the individual based on one week's average earnings was used, taking the 1997 average weekly total earning figure for full-time employment of \$761.90 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1998). A loading of 20%, similar to the productivity loading, was applied to provide some acknowledgment of employer related costs. This gives \$11,886 for the 13 people in the survey or \$44.02 for every missing person regardless of whether anyone lost time off work in that particular case.

Lifetime earnings lost through missed education

In some cases, family members have identified future career prospects and loss of earnings for the missing person as a direct impact because the missing person had missed significant education opportunities or time off school, thereby reducing future employment opportunities. Pinkney and Ewing's (1997) cost benefit analysis of an early intervention with homeless young people in Australia estimated the lifetime cost to a homeless young person of foregone earnings by not completing year 12 at \$29,445. Costs of missed tertiary education were far higher.

...The immediate and long term employment-related costs to the individuals concerned and to the Australian community as a whole exceed \$40 million per year...

In 13 cases the respondent specifically mentioned the missing person's schooling was affected by the incident. This is likely to be a conservative figure, since the question was not specifically asked, and education impacts were only noted where the respondent spontaneously identified this as an issue in response to a general question about whether there were any effects on the missing person. In half of these 13 cases the impact was a major one, adversely affecting the missing person's education and potential career prospects (3 left school permanently, one lost a year's schooling, one refused a university placement, and one lost a tertiary place because of poor examination performance).

A conservative estimate of lost earnings because of missed education opportunities was calculated, using Pinkney and Ewing's figure for these 6 cases, at \$176,670 for the survey group as a whole or \$654.33 for every missing person regardless of whether there were education impacts in that particular case.

Costs of government benefits and revenue loss

From a government perspective, losing or leaving employment associated with a missing person incident not only incurs direct costs such as social security and related benefits, but also loss of tax revenue for that period the person is not working, or loses income in continuing employment. A separate cost estimate was not calculated for this impact.

Lost opportunity costs by government departments and other organisations

Although not a direct financial cost, time spent by officers of government departments or other agencies in processing inquiries on their agency records, or in assisting police investigations in some other way,

represents time that would otherwise be available for that agency's core functions. Therefore time spent dealing with missing person issues is time that is lost from other productive functions. It was not possible to quantify this impact for the study.

Summary of employment-related impacts

Table 15 summarises the employment-related impacts identified and provides an estimated cost per missing person where available.

On the assumption that the survey of families and friends of 270 missing persons is representative of the total missing person population reported to police each year, the immediate and long term employment-related costs to the individuals concerned and to the Australian community as a whole exceed \$40 million per year. This is a conservative estimate.

Health costs associated with persons reported missing to police

Costs of medical attention

A minimum of 190 medical consultations and 146 days hospitalisation were identified by respondents as associated with the missing person incident. In almost all cases, there were no significant expenses attributed to the individual because costs were covered by the public health system, but there is clearly a cost to the community for this tax-funded service.

Medical consultations were costed at the Level B consultation point of \$38 rather the standard consultation cost of \$21, because in many cases the doctor's visit was for stress-related matters likely to require the extensive consultation and counselling. Also, a number were for specialist services and for psychiatrist first visits and ongoing consultations, which incur much higher

Table 15: Estimated costs of employment-related impacts per missing person incident

Employment related impact	Estimated cost per missing person case
Loss of earnings for time off work or business	\$272.05
Industry and public sector costs of days work lost	\$425.23
Productivity loss through impaired work performance	\$13.20
Loss of employment costs to individuals and businesses	\$44.02
Government benefits and revenue loss	Not costed
Lost opportunity costs by government and other organisations	Not costed
Total estimated immediate cost per missing person	Min \$754.50
Lifetime earnings lost through missed education	\$654.33
Total estimated overall cost per missing person	Min\$1408.83

consultation costs than both these levels. The cost of prescriptions was estimated on the basis of the following assumptions: 50% of consultations involved prescribed medication, the majority were prescribed for stress-related symptoms, at an assumed ratio of 75% anti-anxiety to 25% anti-depressants, and an average cost of \$3.50 and \$40 respectively.

People were hospitalised for both physical and mental health reasons, at a rate of roughly one day hospitalised for physical health reasons for every 9 days psychiatric hospital treatment. An estimate of general hospital costs per day was calculated from recurrent cost per Australian case mix adjusted separation in 1995-96 of \$2529 where the average length of stay in public hospitals in for all cases was 4.6 days (Steering Committee for the Review of Commonwealth/State Service Provision, 1998). The National Mental Health Report 1996 (Commonwealth Department of Health and Family Services, 1996) figure of \$359 for total adjusted bed-day costs for psychiatric hospitals and acute care hospitals with specialised mental health services was used as an estimate of the other hospitalisation days.

Based on these figures, a conservative estimate of medical costs associated with the missing person incident is \$63,698 for the survey group as a whole or \$235.92 for every missing person regardless of whether anyone received medical attention in that particular case.

Costs of counselling services

Only three support groups dedicated to supporting families and friends of missing persons were identified in this study as currently operating in Australia. All are operated by volunteers, with no funding support, but incur direct costs such as telephone and other administrative expenses. Other voluntary services that are sometimes accessed by families and friends include groups such victim support groups or organisations specialising in mental health or other special needs such as the Schizophrenia Fellowship or Alzheimers Association.

Professional counselling services offered by psychologists or allied professionals are used by some families at their own cost. Other families have accessed general counselling services available in the community, including church counsellors, school counsellors, community social workers, and others, often provided at no or minimal cost (eg the cost of a donation). In some cases, families have stated they received counselling through a government department, which incurred no direct cost to the family but is an expense for the community.

Telephone counselling support is provided through various services, such as Lifeline, Crisis Line, Kid's Helpline, Parent Support Line, and many others. The number of calls identifiable as dealing with missing person issues is relatively small, according to a range of telephone counselling agencies consulted across Australia, but the presenting issue may be

one of family dysfunction or relationship conflict that is contributed to or triggered by a missing person incident. Similarly, associations dealing with special need groups (such as the Association for Relatives and Friends of the Mentally Ill or the Alzheimers Association) also advised they receive some, but not many, calls that involve advice about or support for a missing person incident. Direct costs for all these agencies attributable to dealing with missing persons issues is generally small relative to their overall client base.

A range of counselling services were used by families and friends of missing persons in the survey, sometimes in relation to some other ongoing problem, most commonly the missing person's general behaviour or other identified family relationship problems. However, only those incidents in which the survey respondents specifically linked the use of the service to some aspect of the missing person episode and its effects were included.

Use of psychiatrists has been included under medical costs earlier. Eight people specified using the services of a psychologist. Costed at an average fee of \$110 per consultation and assuming a conservative figure of only one consultation per person contributes \$880. Thirty-eight people stated they visited a counsellor but did not specify what type of counselling service or professional was used. Assuming a cost of \$95 (the national recommended fee by the National Association of Social Workers) and a conservative estimate of one consultation for each of these 38 people contributes \$3,610. Eight people used various telephone counselling services. Based on the estimated cost of \$15.50 per hour for Lifeline counselling (Lifeline costing cited in Blumel et al, 1993) and an estimated 32 minutes per call (Parentline and Crisis Line) and assuming only one call for each of these eight people adds \$66 for the survey group as a whole.

Based on these figures, a conservative estimate of counselling costs associated with the missing person incident is \$4,556 for the survey group as a whole or \$16.87 for every missing person regardless of whether anyone used counselling services in that particular case.

Cost of pain and suffering

In many cases, the families and friends of missing persons reported a period of significant stress and emotional suffering, but which did not involve medical treatment or counselling services, so has not incurred a direct health related cost. There are obvious difficulties in quantifying the cost of pain and suffering associated with missing person incidents, and it would be inappropriate to simply apply cost models from other areas, such as crimes compensation or civil court action outcomes. A separate cost estimate was not calculated for this impact. However, such emotional suffering is clearly a significant if uncosted impact.

...Only three support groups dedicated to supporting families and friends of missing persons were identified ... as currently operating in Australia. All are operated by volunteers, with no funding support...

...The families and friends of missing persons reported a period of significant stress and emotional suffering...

...The immediate health-related costs to the individuals concerned and to the Australian community as a whole exceed \$7.2 million per year...

Ongoing health vulnerability

There are also ongoing health consequences that may not be able to be identified in the impact period because they do not manifest immediately. For example, a traumatic incident can affect a person's resistance to illness or disease over a longer period. Prolonged stress can exacerbate symptoms of a pre-existing medical condition and contribute to a deterioration in that person's condition that may shorten lifespan or perhaps even precipitate a medical condition that is not diagnosed for some time. In the case of missing persons, as noted for homelessness in Pinkney and Ewing (1997), the experience itself may be associated with practices that put physical health at risk. These may include substance abuse, poor nutrition, or unsafe sex and drug use practices that increase the risk of HIV, hepatitis, or other infectious disease. It was not possible to quantify this impact for the study.

Summary of health related impacts

Table 16 summarises the health-related impacts identified and provides an estimated cost per missing person where available.

On the assumption that the survey of families and friends of 270 missing persons is representative of the total missing person population reported to police each year, the health-related costs to the individuals concerned and to the Australian community as a whole exceed \$7.2 million per year. This is a conservative estimate.

Direct costs in support to missing persons while missing

Costs in providing supported accommodation and services to missing persons

While many missing persons spend the time they are missing at the homes of friends or relatives, others do not have access to alternative accommodation and may rely on the emergency and supported accommodation available to Australia's homeless population. Supported accommodation and assistance

services can include crisis accommodation, medium to long-term supported accommodation, outreach programs, and information services.

For example, one homeless person information centre estimates 1-2% of the 30,000 persons placed per year may be missing persons reported to police. Another agency estimates that 10% of the 1,400 single males using its services each year could be considered missing persons (in the sense that they are significantly detached from families that may be searching for them, although they are not necessarily reported to police as missing persons).

Some agencies offer non-accommodation services such as food, showers or health facilities to homeless people. Again, missing persons will comprise some proportion of that population. Estimates from one such agency is that 4-8 missing young people are identified each week by that agency alone, taking on average several hours per case for a youth worker.

In some cases the missing person incurs the direct cost of hotel, motel, or hostel accommodation. These have not been included in this section, which is specific to community costs in providing support to missing persons. Based on figures from the five missing people known to have stayed at hotels or motels this would add a minimum of \$4.81 per missing person.

In ten cases in the survey, the missing person was known to have spent some or all of the time while missing in shelters or refuges. In four cases only 1 to 3 days were spent, amounting to 9 days total. In 3 cases 2 to 5 weeks were spent in refuges or shelters, and in three cases it was not known how long the missing person had stayed in assisted accommodation but all were missing for over 15 months. In each of the 6 cases spending longer than 1-3 days, a period of 3 weeks was used as the basis for costing, calculating to a total of 135 days.

Consultation with various service providers gave a range of estimated costs of providing assisted accommodation from \$12 to \$137 per bed per night, depending on the type of accommodation, client group and its support needs, size and type of facilities, staffing ratios, and other factors. A figure of about

Table 16: Estimated costs of health-related impacts per missing person incident

Health related impacts	Estimated cost per missing person case
Costs of medical attention	\$235.92
Counselling service costs	\$16.87
Costs of pain and suffering	Not costed
Total estimated immediate cost per missing person	Min \$252.79
Ongoing health vulnerability	Not costed
Total estimated overall cost per missing person	Min \$252.79

\$50 was most commonly cited, and is also a reasonable midpoint in the range identified. That figure takes account of any financial contribution required by the individual to contribute to the cost of providing the service.

Based on these figures, a conservative estimate of costs of supported accommodation associated with the missing person incident is \$6,750 for the survey group as a whole or \$25.00 for every missing person regardless of whether the missing person used such services in that particular case.

Costs in providing advisory services to missing persons

Information and advisory services available to homeless persons or as general counselling services may also be used by missing persons or those considering going missing. Arguably, a proportion of those costs should be taken into account in preparing an economic assessment of the impact of missing persons. However, based on consultations with these services, the proportion of such use and therefore the resource impact on those services is expected to be relatively small. A separate cost estimate was not calculated for these services.

Government allowances and benefits

As already identified, the missing person or a family member may lose or quit a job because of the missing person incident in a proportion of cases. Social security or other government allowances or benefits may therefore be paid, for varying lengths of time, that would not otherwise be incurred as a cost to government.

The issue of government youth allowance is a controversial one, and it is not intended to fuel the debate in this report. However it is a fact that, independent of different perceptions about the appropriateness of such allowances in these circumstances, there will be instances where people going missing received a government benefit that they would not otherwise receive if living at their previous homes. In other cases, the disappearance of the major provider may involve the family receiving family allowances or benefits that would otherwise not be required. It was not possible to

quantify this component on the basis of information available from the survey.

Other costs

There are various other direct Government and community services that may be used by a missing person simply because they are missing, and which might not be accessed if the person was not intending to go or stay missing. For example, in the survey two teenagers sought help from a community legal service to change their names so that they could not be traced through government department information. These miscellaneous types of costs could not be quantified from the information available.

Summary of costs of providing support to missing persons while missing

Table 17 summarises the identified costs of providing support to missing persons while missing and provides an estimated cost per missing person where available.

On the assumption that the survey of families and friends of 270 missing persons is representative of the total missing person population reported to police each year, the costs to the Australian community of providing support to missing persons is estimated at \$0.7 million per year in supported accommodation alone. This is only one component of a range of possible costs to government and the community.

Costs of prevention, intervention, advocacy and policy functions

Policy and coordination functions

There are a number of organisations and community groups that provide a prevention, intervention, or policy and advocacy function. For example, while responsible for some investigative support functions, the National Missing Persons Unit's (NMPU) major role is primarily a policy and coordination one. It would therefore be appropriate to apportion part of the NMPU budget to this area. Given the difficulty of costing other components in this area, NMPU costs have been included in full in earlier sections.

...The costs to the Australian community of providing support to missing persons is estimated at \$0.7 million per year in supported accommodation alone...

Table 17: Estimated costs of providing support to missing persons while missing

Costs of providing support to missing persons while missing	Estimated cost per missing person case
Costs of supported accommodation to missing persons	\$25.00
Costs of non-accommodation assistance to missing persons	Not costed
Costs in providing advisory services to missing persons	Not costed
Government allowances and benefits	Not costed
Total estimated cost per missing person	Min \$25.00

...A community member of one committee estimated an average of 2 days per week is spent on missing persons issues, all in a voluntary capacity...

...It needs to be acknowledged that what may appear a relatively small amount can represent a significant burden for low-income families...

There are two specific committees dedicated to missing persons issues in two States - Missing Persons Committee NSW Inc. and Victorian Missing Persons Inc. Both have community and agency representation. The time of government representatives can be costed directly against salary or considered a lost opportunity cost for the public sector. In some cases, as with police representatives, the cost will have been included in earlier calculations. However, it is more difficult to directly cost the significant time given on a voluntary basis in those committees. For example, one of the community members of one committee estimated an average of 2 days per week is spent on missing persons issues, all in a voluntary capacity.

Government departments, business organisations, the political sector, and others also incur costs associated with developing and implementing policies specifically generated to address missing person issues. A current example is the Senate Select Committee on Information Technology where the issue of access to government information to trace missing persons is being considered.

Specific prevention initiatives

A number of diverse initiatives intended to prevent or to minimise the consequences or the recurrence of missing person incidents were identified during consultations with agency and community groups and interviews with families and friends of missing persons. Some are widely available (such as the Operation Home Free or Lions Identikid program), while others operate in only one jurisdiction or as pilot programs (eg the Safe Return program). A number of prevention strategies are highlighted during Missing Persons Week or set out in publications providing advice to parents such as Wyles (1988) or Vincent (1993).

Parents experiencing repeated episodes of their children going missing may seek counselling in order to prevent further occurrences, and courses such as Tough Love have been mentioned by several families in the survey. Others may initiate, or be contacted by, the relevant community/family services department and intervention strategies put in place.

Institutions such as psychiatric hospitals, nursing homes, and similar may incur costs of physical security measures. In some cases, families and friends have reported significant costs to improve home security and restrict movements of the missing person once located.

Given the diversity and, in some cases, local rather than national operation of individual initiatives, it was not possible to quantify this component.

Missing Persons Week

As with the NMPU budget, the cost component of major initiatives such as Missing Persons Week that is relevant to prevention rather than location would ideally be included here. It was not possible to quantify a separate prevention component for this study.

Advice and support from other agencies

Some community groups, because of ethnic, cultural, or language reasons, may turn to agencies other than police or the more obvious government departments and sources for help or support. They may instead rely on citizens' advice bureaus, community legal centres, community health services servicing their ethnic or cultural group, or specific community or religious networks, for such support.

Other families, desperate for information or advice or support, may access diverse agencies and organisations with no obvious responsibility for missing person issues. For example, one father of a missing youth contacted every community agency from the White Pages directory for advice or assistance in the search for his missing son. It was not possible to quantify this component on the basis of information available from the survey.

Summary

While much is being done at a local and national level in the way of prevention and intervention initiatives, and policy and coordination functions, it was not possible to cost this component for the study.

Other direct costs to families and friends associated with persons reported missing to police

Legal costs associated with legal status and property determinations

Depending on the circumstances, some cases could incur (directly or indirectly) legal costs associated with court appearances or tribunal hearings, and may incur solicitor or lawyer's costs or Legal Aid and possibly interpreters. Applications for Coroners Court determinations on presumption of death may be sought. This can involve significant costs to the individual (for example, one person interviewed but not as part of the survey had incurred over \$380,000 in legal costs to deal with the missing person incident) or to the community where Legal Aid is involved.

A total of \$43,400 legal costs were incurred by 8 people in the survey, which calculates at \$160.70 for every missing person regardless of whether anyone incurred legal expenses in that particular case.

Other direct costs incurred by families and friends of missing persons

In some cases, families and friends incur costs associated with a range of diverse matters specific to their circumstances. Both type and amount of cost are diverse. Thirty people specifically mentioned a cost in this miscellaneous category, at a total cost of approximately \$75,000, or \$277.78 for every missing person regardless of whether anyone incurred such an expense in that particular case. This is a very

conservative estimate, based on only those expenses specifically identified by individuals as a direct cost, even where it was apparent from the interview that other costs would have been incurred.

It needs to be acknowledged that what may appear a relatively small amount can represent a significant burden for low-income families. For example, one respondent stated that her family grocery bill was \$90 more during the period that her daughter was missing because she felt she could not be away from home for the length of time needed to do her normal shopping at the supermarket. She was therefore obliged to shop at the more expensive corner shop. The extra \$90 incurred put her into arrears with her rent which took the family over a month to overcome.

Other costs associated with persons reported missing to police

There is a range of other impacts that simply cannot be costed reliably, but which should be acknowledged. Some of these unquantified impacts are outlined below.

Relationship and quality of life impact

The impacts on relationships and quality of life have already been described. While they occur in almost every instance, and are pervasive and extreme in many cases, there is no way to reliably estimate the economic impact of such consequences for this study.

Fear of crime impacts from media coverage of some cases

Sensationalised reporting of missing person cases and a limited understanding of the facts about missing person location rates and reasons for going missing may affect the levels of fear in the community. The extent of fear of crime and its effects has been well documented elsewhere (eg Tulloch et al, 1998).

Crime costs

In some cases, missing people may become involved in some level of criminal activity to support themselves. There may be instances of property damage in 'squatting' or trying to find shelter in public places. There is also a flow-on effect into criminal justice system costs where the missing person is charged with such offences. For example, a NSW survey of teenage runaways found 9.1% admitted to being arrested by police for crimes committed, including burglary, stealing, and shoplifting (Marcon, 1993). Overseas reports cite significant levels of involvement in prostitution or trading in drugs (National Missing Persons Helpline, 1996). In several cases reported in the survey, the missing person stole or damaged property in the family or relatives homes, purportedly to go missing. There may therefore be both a direct cost to the individual and an indirect cost to the community.

Generational costs

In some cases there is also the potential for substantial 'generational costs'. The potential lost earnings of missing person's education being disrupted so that his or her career and earning prospects are permanently affected has already been identified, but such impacts may also occur for other family members. Younger siblings can suffer a level of distress that might not be apparent at the time but which could resurface in later life. Interpersonal and family relationship problems exacerbated by or left unresolved because of the person going missing can affect the missing person's own parenting and relationship skills in the future, thereby affecting other generations.

The overall economic impact of missing persons on the Australian community

Estimated costs of missing persons reported to police

The major direct costs are in the costs to police and other agencies of locating the missing person or information about that person, costs to families in their own search activities, health and health-related expenditure for the community, and lost earnings from time off work or business. Less common and therefore providing less of an economic impact overall are costs of providing support services for missing people and legal costs to individuals.

There are also significant employment related indirect costs. Some of these are immediate, including loss of productivity through lost time from work or business and government revenue loss from taxation. Others are long-term consequences, such as potential future earning loss by young missing person whose education is disrupted. There are also lost opportunity costs for government and other agencies involved in assisting police or non-tracing agencies to locate missing persons either directly or through provision of agency information where such assistance or information is provided without full cost reimbursement.

Indirect costs of health, emotional, relationship, or other social impacts associated with the missing person incident are diverse and almost impossible to quantify. The difficulties of quantifying pain and suffering are well known in insurance case claims, victim compensations or civil legal actions. It is beyond the scope of this study to attempt to develop a reliable and credible estimate on this aspect. It is also arguably inappropriate to attempt to compare, for example, the acute distress and fear felt by a parent the night a child goes missing with the chronic anguish and depression experienced over the years that a spouse has been missing without trace, on the same quantitative scale. However, these non-economic impacts need to be taken into account so that policy and practice is not simply grounded in, or its effectiveness tested only against, economic expediency.

...Sensationalised reporting of missing person cases a limited understanding of the facts about missing person location rates and reasons for going missing may affect the levels of fear in the community...

Table 18: Estimated immediate total costs of missing persons reported to police

	Estimated cost per missing person case
Location costs	\$888.80
Immediate employment-related costs	\$754.50
Health-related costs	\$252.79
Costs of providing support to missing persons while missing*	\$25.00
Other direct costs to families and friends of missing persons	\$438.48
Total estimated cost per missing person	Min \$2359.57

** based on cost estimates for only one component, and therefore under-representative of this component*

Table 18 summarises the available cost estimates from earlier sections, taking into account only the immediate costs. The total figure, as well as the cost estimate in each individual area, will under-represent the full economic costs because in each case a number of components were impossible to cost or estimate with any degree of confidence.

This cost estimate, by taking into account impacts identified by families and friends of missing persons, is considered to be an appropriate estimate of the cost to the Australian community of the majority of missing person cases. It could be argued that this cost may not be representative of people reported missing from institutions because there will not be the same level of impact on family and friends in those cases. However, an elderly relative going missing from a nursing home can have the same impact on work and health of family and friends as if that person had gone missing from the family home. The same can be said of a young adult who absconds after being admitted to a psychiatric hospital for depression and suicide risk, or an intellectually disabled person missing from a community-based facility. A young person absconding repeatedly from a youth supervised care situation may not generate much immediate concern about that young person being at risk. However, there were also comparable cases in the survey where the family stated there were no or few impacts because he or she had been missing so often before.

Location costs for police would be similar, on average, whether the person is reported missing from an institution or elsewhere. Cases incurring significant police time (eg a psychiatric hospital absconder believed at high risk of harm to self or others) would compensate for those receiving little immediate police attention (eg a regular youth absconder from supervised care reported because it is a reporting requirement rather than because of any safety or welfare fears). In some cases the families or friends may not bear any search costs, but this would be compensated by costs incurred by the institution in staff reporting and locating the missing person.

For these reasons, the assumption is made that average costs calculated for missing persons based on information from surveys of families and friends will be applicable to persons reported missing from institutions.

Estimated costs of missing persons registered with non-police tracing services

This costing is of necessity more subjective than those for police because it is not based specifically on a representative survey of the relevant population.

In regard to location costs, the Salvation Army has calculated the average cost of a tracing request at \$300 per case. Estimates for Australian Red Cross (ARC) and International Social Service (ISS) are difficult to calculate on a consistent or reliable national basis. Both agencies provide a range of services other than tracing, and it would be difficult to disaggregate total agency budget figures accurately to cover the cost of the specific tracing service component, and then to try to accurately cost just those inquiries originating in Australia. The distinction between inquiries originating in Australia and outside Australia was drawn for comparability with other cost estimates, given the focus of this study is impacts on the Australian community. A simple calculation of ARC's national tracing service budget component against the total number of new cases per year (whether originating in or outside Australia) averages at almost \$2000 per case. The varying costs for the three non-police tracing services may be due in part to different ways of estimating them but also may reflect differences in the client population and nature of the service provided.

The health, work, and social impacts on the families and friends of missing persons and on the community as a whole of people registered missing with the three non-police tracing services are as diverse and pervasive as when a person is reported to police. This may be because of the prolonged period involved. For example, the Salvation Army has reconciled

Table 19: Estimated cost of missing persons reported to non-police tracing agencies

	Estimated cost per missing person case
Location costs	\$844.15
Immediate employment-related costs	\$754.50
Health-related costs	\$252.79
Total estimated cost per missing person	Min \$1851.44

** based on cost estimates for only one component, and therefore under-representative of this component*

people and families separated for over 70 years while some current ARC cases deal with World War 2 family separations. The same psychological and emotional impacts and fears experienced when a single person goes missing have to be faced, but sometimes for whole families that are missing. Other impacts may be peculiar to the trauma created by war and disaster (such as survivor guilt and loss of identity caused by not knowing whether there are any other family members left alive, as identified by Australian Red Cross Tracing Agency workers).

In some cases, similar support agencies such as counselling and health services may be used. In others, specialist support agencies (for example, the Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture) may be accessed or there may be greater reliance on ethnic community groups and agencies for general support

In addition to the sorts of costs identified in the survey of families and friends of people reported missing to police, economic costs for clients of non-police tracing services can be substantial especially where the missing person has disappeared overseas. For example, in one case telephone bills exceeded \$1000 per month. In other cases, family members incurred significant travel and accommodation costs to search overseas.

There was not the opportunity in this study to conduct a representative survey of clients of the three non-police tracing agencies in order to assess and cost impacts. However, it is unlikely that the economic impacts on families and friends, the health and work related impacts, or the emotional and quality of life consequences will be less than those calculated for police on average.

A very subjective estimate of the economic costs of people registered missing with the three non-police agencies was made for this study, based on a number of assumptions. These include the assumption that, on average, the direct health and work-related costs will be similar to those incurred in police reported cases. This calculation also assumes that the direct costs incurred by families and friends in their own attempts to locate missing people will not be less than those identified in the survey of missing persons reported to police. Agency location costs are based on an average of \$300 for each Salvation Army case and \$2000 for each new ARC and ISS case.

Based on these assumptions, the estimated minimum cost of locating missing people registered with the three non-police tracing services and the immediate employment and health related costs to families and friends and to the community calculates to \$1851.44 per missing person case, or \$4.4 million per year.

Summary

The estimated economic costs of locating missing people and the associated immediate health and employment-related costs are estimated at \$1851 per person for people reported to non-police tracing services and (including other direct cost components) \$2360 per person reported to police. Extrapolating to the relevant 1997 missing person population, this gives a total cost figure of over \$72 million to the Australian community, without taking into account the long-term impacts on families and friends or the missing person. For example, including an estimate of the cost of lost lifetime earnings from missed education for missing persons reported to police alone adds another \$18.8 million.

...Total cost figure is over \$72 million to the Australian community, without taking into account the long-term impacts...

EFFECTIVENESS OF SERVICES

Locating missing persons

Fortunately, most persons reported missing to police are located, usually within a relatively short period of time. These figures have been presented earlier in this report. Calculating statistics on a comparable basis for non-police tracing services is difficult, as the measure of success may not be simply locating the person. In some cases, a case may be closed and deemed a successful outcome if specific information sought about the missing person is obtained, even if the current whereabouts of the missing person are still not known. In others, actual reconciliation rather than simply locating the person may be the prime objective.

The Salvation Army ratio of closed to new cases in 1997 was 99% nation-wide for all inquiries, regardless of whether they originated in Australia or elsewhere. However, on the basis of categories of successful outcome advised by Salvation Army Tracing officers, 66% of closed cases were successfully resolved. In the other one-third of cases the inquiry may have been cancelled by the inquirer, or cancelled by Salvation Army officers because, for example, there was insufficient information to pursue the inquiry, or for other reasons the case was categorised unsuccessful. The 'unsuccessful' category also includes cases more appropriately considered 'partially successful', where the missing person was contacted (for example by receiving correspondence referred through a government department) but the missing person declined to respond to that letter.

International Social Service's analysis of case closures for its national office in 1997 gives figures of 64% where case service was provided and a further 28% where case service was partially provided, giving a combined rate of 92%. This figure refers to all categories of ISS casework, not just tracing. The NSW Regional Office, which reports separately, stated that the primary problem was addressed fully or in part in 79% of cases closed during the year.

Australian Red Cross advised over 260 cases were successfully resolved in 1997 and about 700 new cases are received each year, with approximately 5,000 cases currently open or pending. The agency is developing a case management system that will provide an information base for assessing successful resolution rates nationally in the future, but does not consider that the currently available statistics are appropriate for calculating a reliable resolution rate.

Satisfaction with police and agency services

The survey of families and friends of 270 persons reported missing to police asked a series of questions about satisfaction with the services of police and any other agencies involved in locating the missing person. For each agency involved, people were asked whether they were generally satisfied with the service provided, what they found particularly helpful, and what they considered could be improved. These were asked separately for the point at which the initial report was made, for the period during which the person was missing, and, if relevant, when they were advised the missing person had been located or in any subsequent contact after they had been located.

Only 12 cases (4.4%) involved an agency other than police, most commonly the State or Territory government department responsible for youth and family services (5 cases) and the Salvation Army (3). Additionally, in four other cases, police from another jurisdiction were also involved and in one incident the family employed a private detective.

Most people reported they were satisfied with the service provided by police at each stage, 83% with the initial reporting stage, 73% with the investigation stage, and 71% of relevant cases where police dealt with the family when the missing person was located (about a quarter of all cases). A small number (less than 4% for each stage) stated they were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, and the remainder stated they were not satisfied with the service received for a variety of reasons. These figures are consistent with other opinion surveys of satisfaction with police service generally, where people report satisfaction levels of around 80% nationally and in each jurisdiction (eg Steering Committee for the Review of Commonwealth/State Service Provision, 1998).

People were also asked to identify what they found helpful and what they felt could be improved at each of the three stages of contact with police. In about half of relevant cases at each stage, people either did not volunteer further comment or made only general statements about overall satisfaction or dissatisfaction without referring to specific matters. Comments were grouped into four specific areas - taking appropriate or efficient action, making contact or providing feedback, attitude and interpersonal approach of the officer, and timeliness. Issues for improvement were raised both by people who reported they were satisfied with police services and those who reported they were not satisfied.

...Most people reported they were satisfied with the service provided by police at each stage...

Table 20: Areas of police service identified by families and friends of missing person as particularly helpful or which could be improved at initial report, investigation, and outcome stages

	Initial report		Investigation		Advising outcome	
	helpful	improve	helpful	improve	helpful	improve
Taking appropriate or efficient action	87	36	43	23	32	10
Contact and providing feedback	29	7	69	43	3	0
Attitude and inter-personal approach	74	28	19	7	7	5
Timeliness	20	43	4	3	4	1
Other	12	19	9	13	0	3
Total comments*	222	133	144	89	45	19

* specific comments made by one person may relate to one or more individual areas

These findings are consistent with other opinion surveys about reasons for satisfaction or dissatisfaction with police services (eg Steering Committee for the Review of Commonwealth/State Service Provision, 1998; Swanton et al, 1988).

Taking appropriate and efficient action was a commonly identified category for both matters perceived as particularly helpful and areas where service could be improved at all three stages. However, an area for improvement more commonly cited by family and friends at the reporting stage was the timeliness of taking action (48% of comments made in that area). Similarly, a more commonly cited issue for improvement at the investigation stage was contact with families and friends to provide feedback (32%). The attitude or interpersonal approach of the officer was also commonly cited as particularly helpful at the initial report stage (33%).

In 33 instances (12% of all cases) people reporting the missing person were specifically told by police that they would have to wait a designated time period, usually 24 hours, before any action could be taken. In four of these cases, people specifically stated this was the waiting period before making the report. In other cases they stated the report was taken and the waiting period referred to the time before active police action would be taken, for example, alerting patrols. In most of the 33 cases it was not clear whether the delay period was before the report was taken or after the report and before specific search action was initiated.

These 33 cases occurred across jurisdictions, missing person gender and age groups (from age 8 to adults), regardless of whether the person being reported had a previous history of going missing or had some special need, and regardless of the reason families believed the person may have gone missing. In one case where the missing person had stolen the foster-parent's car to go missing, the respondent stated that police immediately took the stolen car report but would not take the missing person report for another 8 hours.

The number of cases where agencies other than police were involved are too small to allow statistically meaningful analysis. Overall, satisfaction levels and comments were reasonably similar to those for police service.

Experiences and satisfaction with existing support services

The survey of families and friends of missing persons also asked whether help was sought from any professional, government department, community agency or group for support, and if so, experience of and satisfaction with the service. In 104 cases (39%) one or more people used some support service, often for reasons associated with but not specific to the missing person incident. In fact in only 42 of the 104 cases (40%) was the support service apparently used solely because of that particular missing person incident. In the remaining 62 cases, the support service was already being used for another reason, or the support service was employed to deal with issues associated with wider difficulties of which the missing person incident was only one part. However, in every case the respondent stated that service was also used to deal with matters arising from the missing person incident.

A number of people used several agencies or types of agency. In 62 cases (23%) one or more people received counselling support of some kind. The type of counselling was not always specified, but included services from family counsellors, marriage counsellors, school counsellors, psychiatrists, psychologists, general practitioners, and in 8 cases, through telephone counselling services such as Lifeline or Parentline. The majority stated they were satisfied with the service received (37 satisfied, 15 not satisfied, and 9 not specified). The number of specific comments about matters found helpful or areas for improvement were too small for reliable statistical analysis.

...An area for improvement commonly cited by family and friends at the reporting stage was the timeliness of taking action...

...People indicated that what they wanted from an specialist service was counselling and emotional support, assistance, advice and information...

Fifty-nine families and friends (22%) sought support from government agencies, most commonly, the government department responsible for youth and family services in that State or Territory. More people stated they were not satisfied with the service than satisfied (20 and 35 respectively and 4 not specified). This was for a variety of reasons not necessarily associated with adequacy of support for the specific missing person related issue.

Twenty-five (9%) used other community-based support such as the church-run groups and services or self-help courses. No person identified using any missing person specific support group. Most people stated they were satisfied with the service received (18 satisfied, 3 not satisfied, and 4 not specified).

The majority of those 166 families or friends who did not seek help from a support service indicated this was because they did not feel the need to do so (80% of relevant cases). Others stated it was because they didn't know where to go (10%), or they didn't want to use them for various reasons (6%) or for other reasons (4%) such as 'didn't think of it - too busy searching'.

Perceptions about specialised support

All survey respondents were asked whether they felt that they would have used a specialised support service were such a service available, and, if so, what they would have wanted from such a service. About half (58%) indicated they would have used such a service, 4% believed they might but couldn't say for certain, and 2% didn't know. Over one-third (37%) stated they would not have used such a service, often adding that the reason was because the time the person was missing was too short.

The sorts of services respondents considered such a specialist service should provide varied considerably, and included counselling and emotional support, assistance with searching, advice about how to proceed,

information about police procedures, and about other diverse matters such as teenager and parental rights, parenting advice or reasons why teenagers go missing.

The survey asked what was considered to be the most difficult part of the whole experience. People often identified the uncertainty, for example, not knowing whether the missing person was safe (26%), not knowing where the person might be (13%), or just 'not knowing' generally (12%). Other issues identified included dealing with the emotions generated (12%) and accepting that the missing person had left home (9%). Others mentioned not knowing why the missing person left (8 cases), feelings of helplessness and not knowing what action to take (11), the waiting (12), diverse issues relating to police action (such as waiting for 24 hours) or concerns about whether and when to report the person missing to police (9), and how to deal with the missing person when located or returned home (12). In only two cases did anyone specifically identify lack of support in response to this question.

The survey also asked people to identify what would have been most helpful to address that single most difficult part of the experience. The most common response was 'just a phone call' or some contact from the missing person or about the missing person indicating he or she was safe and well (51 cases). Another 30 people identified support, either specifically from family (11 cases) or from a professional or support group (4) or simply 'someone to talk to' (15). Ten cases identified action by police or some other agency with information to help locate the missing person and the remainder covered a diverse set of specific issues or actions. In about half of all cases, the person did not identify any specific helpful action.

Access to information held by government departments and other agencies

The survey of families and friends of missing persons also asked whether people considered that the sort of information needed to locate the missing person was always available to police or to themselves or

...People often identified the uncertainty as a major concern not knowing whether the missing person was safe...

Table 21: Type of service desired of a specialist missing person support function identified by the survey of families and friends of missing persons, according to whether the missing person reported to police was an adult or under 18.

Type of support	No.*
Searching – eg direct assistance, advice on how/where to look	67
Emotional support while the person is missing	64
Other support eg practical, type of support not specified	24
Information eg about children's rights, police procedures, possible reasons	29
Post-location support eg mediation between family and missing person	16
Other or unable to categorise	22

* more than one type of support may be identified by a single person

anyone else helping to locate him or her. Only 41(15%) stated some information was not available, and generally this related to photographs or other identifying information about the missing person. However, in 12 cases access to government or other agency information considered to have helped locate then person was cited as not being available. This included Department of Social Security information in 6 cases, youth/family service department information (2), and one case each for medical information, telephone account details, information from refugees, and a legal service withholding change of name details.

Government information was specifically identified in seven other cases as the most helpful thing in locating the missing person.

Access to government information is not a common issue across the whole sample of people reported missing to police, as would be expected given the short period of time between being reported missing and located in most cases. However, in a small number of longer-term missing cases of people reported missing to police it is a particularly important issue. Given the client population of the three non-police tracing agencies, it is also a significant issue for them.

Most important area to improve

At the end of the survey interview, families and friends of missing persons were asked to identify overall the most important thing that should be done to improve the situation for families and friends of missing persons. Eighty percent made some specific suggestion. The 240 responses covered a diversity of issues, but could be grouped into four main areas of action - police practice, other agency or government policies and practices, support services, and family or community actions. The most common responses related to the need to provide support for families and friends (39% of relevant responses) including counselling, emotional support, advice and information, practical support, or just 'support' not further defined.

Police issues were cited in 21% of relevant responses, most commonly communication with families (14 cases), faster action (13), attitude and interpersonal approach by officers (12), referring families to support services (4), and lack of police powers to return a missing person home when located (3).

Other agency issues were cited in 19% of relevant responses, most commonly youth allowance and teenager rights issues (13 cases) and access to government information (7). This category also included responses that called for agency services such as mediation between families and the missing person (7) and better communication between agencies (3).

Action by families specifically or the community in general were cited in 15% of relevant responses, most commonly referring to family communication (8 cases).

Summary

Families and friends of missing persons were generally satisfied with the service received from police. Specific areas for improvement most commonly identified were delays before acting and more contact and feedback to families. A sympathetic and understanding approach at the time of taking the initial report was the most commonly identified positive feature. Existing support services were not used by a large proportion of people, most often because people 'did not feel the need'. However, the most commonly cited area to improve was considered to be the provision of support services. There was strong support for a service specialising in missing person issues, although the sorts of service people considered it should provide varied.

...Often, people stated what would be helpful was just a phone call or some contact from the missing person or about the missing person indicating he or she was safe and well...

...There was strong support for a service specialising in missing person issues, although the sorts of service people considered it should provide varied...

...The area cited as the most important to improve was support for families and friends...

...People reported experiencing acute emotional crisis, with a high level of acute emotional distress, anxiety, guilt and fear when the person...was first learnt to be missing...

...There is an emerging need, after the first few days, for support to help families to reconcile to, and deal with, the fact that their loved ones may be missing for some time, and possibly may not return....

AREAS OF NEED AND POTENTIAL STRATEGIES

Information from the survey and interviews with families and friends of missing persons, consultation with government and non-government agencies and community groups, and from national and international research, point to a number of areas for action. These are outlined below. Other issues dealing with more specific concerns or relevant to only one organisation have been brought to the attention of the relevant agencies during the course of this research and are not duplicated here. The identified areas below are not presented in any order of priority and are not intended to represent 'the answer'. They are national issues emerging from this study together with some possible strategies that might help address identified concerns. Ultimately, it is up to the agencies involved with missing persons working together and working with families and friends of missing persons and the wider community, that are best placed to identify, develop or adapt, and implement the most appropriate and practical solutions in their area of concern.

Support services

The need for effective support services for families and friends of missing persons is the single issue raised most consistently in the surveys and interviews. However, the type of support need identified varied markedly.

In many of the survey interviews, families and friends wanted practical search assistance. People stated they had 'no need' for services providing counselling or emotional support, either because they had effective family and community support networks, or because they were too busy trying to locate the person to be concerned about emotional support issues. Their need is one that could be met by information and advice totally separate from an emotional or counselling support setting. It is also an immediate and urgent need. The families are sometimes desperate for advice as to where and how to start to look so that they can take an active role in searching. For many, taking action may be the most effective way for them to cope with the emotional distress of the situation. Counselling and emotional support may be seen as a distraction rather than a benefit at that time. Offering emotional support when the stated need is much more tightly focused on advice and practical information may be counterproductive for some.

In other cases, the identified need was specifically and only for emotional support. People reported experiencing acute emotional crisis, with a high level of acute emotional distress, anxiety, guilt, and fear

when the person (particularly if a child or teenager) was first learnt to be missing. Families commonly stated they wanted reassurance or 'someone to just listen'. The identified need seemed to be for immediate reassurance that the person will be found safe and well. Often, support from families and friends met that need. For some, there was no available social or family support network or those networks had been strained by ongoing relationship difficulties and there was a need to rely on outside support.

There was a stated need by some, particularly single parents where a child had gone missing, for a support service available on a 24-hour basis for those times (such as the sleepless night-time hours when anxiety peaks) when there is a reluctance to call on social networks for support. Also, many people were either actively searching or reluctant to leave the home in case the missing person returned or made contact, or in one case a parent was restricted to the home to care for young children while the partner was out searching. Access to immediate counselling support at a time of day or night that does not distract from active searching or that does not require a person to leave home means telephone, rather than face to face counselling, is often a more viable option.

In the smaller proportion of cases where the missing person episode extends beyond a few days, there are ongoing emotional stresses unlikely to be alleviated by simple reassurance and 'having someone to emotionally unburden on'. There is an emerging need, after the first few days, for support to help families reconcile to, and deal with, the fact that their loved ones may be missing for some time, and possibly may not return. In other cases, wider personal or relationship issues triggered or exacerbated by the missing person incident may surface. For most people, there is still ongoing emotional support from families and friends and other social networks in the early months. Depending on the extent of emotional distress and the adequacy of existing social and family support networks or personal coping strategies, professional intervention and counselling may be sought. The need here is for those counselling and other support services to be sympathetic to, and understanding of, missing person issues.

Inevitably over time the level of emotional support from outside the immediate family is likely to drop off. A number of interviewed families where the person had been missing for some years have reported increasing social isolation or feelings of social alienation from previously supportive extended family and social networks. There is a chronic level

of emotional distress that, as reported by the families, does not lessen over time, but the emotional support to help deal with them has virtually disappeared. Families may be receiving professional counselling and support, often using grief counselling models, but those interviewed often stated they found that approach unhelpful and not sympathetic to their particular circumstances. The need expressed was for a more understanding and appropriate counselling approach, but also, for contact with and support from others in similar circumstances.

In some cases, both short and long-term missing person episodes, the families and friends expressed a specific need for practical support in the home. Several stated that what was needed was someone to come into the family home to take over responsibility for managing day-to-day affairs so that the families could be freed up to concentrate all their efforts on searching.

In some instances, again in both short and long-term cases, the stated need was for help in reconciling the family and the missing person when found.

In a number of cases in the survey of families and friends of missing persons, it was clear that the particular missing person incident was part of a much larger picture of family conflict and relationship dysfunction. In such cases, the family's need may be much wider than emotional support in relation to that particular incident, and may extend to more intensive counselling or mediation focusing on the wider issues of which the missing person incident may be only a small part. Missing person issues need to be addressed in that context, but also, the specific impacts of the missing person incident need to be addressed and not simply lost within the wider problem area by those providing intervention or counselling support.

Similarly, where the missing person may go missing because of some special need (eg psychiatric disorder or memory loss), a better understanding of missing person issues may assist such specialised support services to better help families and friends deal with the whole of the problem.

Acute emotional crisis support

Emotional support to assist people in the 'crisis' stage of emotional distress when the person first goes missing could be serviced by existing telephone counselling services, but with greater awareness and training for those operators in dealing with missing person issues and the emotions that are commonly associated with it. For example, in Victoria, Crisisline counsellors receive training from a member of Victorian Missing Persons Committee Inc.

Professional counselling

The needs of families and friends who are suffering the traumas associated with someone missing for a lengthy period of time often demand a different level and type of support. The emotional stress has been

described by many as similar to a grieving process but where, because the situation is unresolved, the family cannot pass on through that grief and resume their normal lives. In many cases, the level and severity of this emotional distress and its consequences on the person's mental and physical health, relationships, and quality of life call for professional intervention. However, the traditional grief counselling models used by professional counsellors have been described by a number of people as inadequate and unhelpful. Many families have described their desperate need for support over the longer term but feel they haven't been able to obtain the type of help they feel they need.

The development of a training course on continuous grieving targeting missing person issues run by representatives of the NSW Missing Person Committee Inc., through the Centre for Community Welfare Training, is a major step. However, much more needs to be done to develop and conduct specialised training courses in unresolved grief and missing person issues for professional counsellors across Australia.

Support groups specific to long-term missing cases

Contact and support from others in similar situations is considered by some to be critical, and an informal contact and support network has been established between various families across the country. However, as described by one very dedicated woman who makes herself available to support families with missing relatives while she herself is suffering the same experience of a long-term missing family member, this becomes a case of 'the cripples handing out the crutches'.

Several families and friends of long-term missing persons who were interviewed described the social isolation and adverse reactions from previously supportive friends and family members that can occur over time as the episode continues. In some cases other family members have difficulty dealing with the ongoing stresses of a long-term missing person incident and may distance themselves from the missing person's parents or immediate family. Close friends often don't seem to know how to treat the family of the missing person or what to say, and so may withdraw from the relationship. This sort of reaction was also received from people in the wider community, including those who are strangers to the family concerned, particularly where the case has been a highly publicised one. Families are made to feel 'on show' in public, which further reinforces feelings of social isolation. In some cases, people described their experiences as feeling they were victims of a social stigma, where others saw them as 'bad parents' or somehow to blame for the disappearance of their loved one, or at least for being responsible for not having prevented it happening. Some people specifically cited shame and embarrassment among the emotions they experienced.

...A number of interviewed families where the person had been missing for some years reported increasing social isolation or feelings of social alienation from previously supportive extended family and social networks...

...There is a need to develop and conduct specialised training courses in unresolved grief and missing person issues for professional counsellors across Australia...

...Further development of information and practical guidance, specifically to assist and empower families in their own searching, is needed...

Such actual or perceived loss of support from existing family and social networks heightens the need for support from others going through similar experiences. Sharing such experiences will make the family or friends of missing persons feel less isolated and help to 'normalise' those feelings and experiences for them. The identified need expressed by families and friends here is not for professional support, but for support from others who have been through similar experiences.

Only three support groups specialising in missing person issues were identified during this study as currently operating, although several others were in the process of being established or developed. As mentioned earlier, one type of support structure or group cannot cater for all needs. There is a strong potential, for example, for 'runaway' children issues to swamp other concerns simply because of the sheer volume of numbers. This need for specialised support has already been demonstrated in the two support groups currently trying to be established by families of missing persons. One is seeking to specialise in support for families where the missing person is presumed dead, the other for families of people missing overseas. Both relate to long-term missing person circumstances, a group fortunately not representative of the vast majority of missing person cases. Even in this smaller subgroup of missing persons, it is already identified that special needs warrant specialised support group services. The problems of 'mis-matching' supporters with new families seeking support has also been identified (eg Colquhoun-Craig, 1995) as potentially exacerbating the trauma for both families rather than ameliorating it.

The establishment of support groups specialising in providing support to families and friends of long-term missing people would provide an opportunity for people in those circumstances to share social and emotional support with others who have also had similar experiences. However, it may be helpful to also involve a trained specialist counsellor similar to the model used in some suicide bereavement groups. This gives an opportunity for professional intervention within a shared support network. The skills, attitude and personal qualities of that professional counsellor would be critical.

During consultation, associations of self-help groups active in a number of States and Territories have all indicated a willingness to assist in establishing and publicising any support groups in their jurisdiction. However, financial assistance and provision of some equipment and facilities is a real need, particularly if it is intended to include a professional counselling component within the support group. A small seeding grant from a State or Territory government would help establish the infrastructure, fund the counselling component of such a self-help group for a period, and evaluate its effectiveness as a national model.

Information support

For those people seeking immediate practical advice, information could be provided in a number of ways.

For example, information could be available in written form through a simple brochure distributed by police when the missing person report is made. Information could be made available on the Internet using the existing NMPU Internet Homepage. A hotline could be established, providing access to pre-recorded messages in the first instance or, for more detailed queries, diverted to a trained operator. The extent of and manner in which such information support could be made available on a person-to-person basis, rather than in written or recorded message form, would depend on available funding and identifying an appropriate auspicing agency.

Options for providing or auspicing such a service are many and varied. They include the National Missing Persons Unit, police (perhaps on a national basis provided by rotation through each jurisdiction), Salvation Army Tracing Services, missing person committees, missing person support groups, existing telephone support services in States and Territories such as Parentline or Parent Help Line, a dedicated 0055 telephone information service number, or some other designated government department, non-government organisation, or community group. It is an issue that could be considered further by the National Advisory Committee on Missing Persons.

Some resources already exist. The National Missing Persons Unit, in conjunction with State and Territory police, has developed and nationally distributed a brochure to be given to families and friends when they report a person missing. It provides brief information to inform people about general police procedures and how they can assist police as well as some support referral numbers for the jurisdiction. A companion brochure on what search action families and friends can take immediately and what avenues are available to them if the person continues missing for a lengthy period of time may be a very useful source of practical assistance to some families. A detailed practical guide to assist families and friends locate persons missing overseas has already been produced by the family of a missing person (Houghton & Mertin, 1995).

Further development of information and practical guidance, specifically to assist and empower families in their own searching, with widespread distribution and availability of such material, would meet a real need expressed by many families and friends of missing persons.

Post-location mediation

For a smaller proportion of people there was a continuing need expressed for support when the missing person was found. People cited difficulties in knowing how to deal with the missing person when he or she returned home, or how to re-establish effective relationships when the missing person was located but refused to return home. These are wider relationship difficulties rather than missing-person specific ones, and could be dealt

with within general counselling, intervention, mediation, or other support models.

This was also an issue identified as relevant to family reconciliations for non-police tracing service clients, particularly for long-absence separations from overseas families.

Wider intervention and support services

In some cases, particularly where the person had gone missing before, the stated support needs were often for dealing with the missing person's behaviour generally, of which going missing was perceived as only one of many problems. The most appropriate support services to deal with those needs would not be missing person specific. However, a better understanding of missing person issues and impacts on the family by those support or intervention services may provide better outcomes for the family in the immediate term, and might also contribute to addressing the wider issues in the longer term.

Special need support services

Where the missing person incident occurs in part or in full because of some special need, such as Alzheimers, a psychotic episode, or intellectual disability, there are existing specialist networks that can be accessed by families and friends. Examples include the Association for Mental Health (a group represented on the NSW missing person committee), Schizophrenia Fellowship, Alzheimers or Dementia Association, Brain Injury Association, Attention Deficit Disorder Information and Support services, and others. A wider awareness about missing person issues may assist such groups to address the needs of those people in their client group where going missing is also an area of concern.

Information about available services

In some cases, families and friends of missing persons in the survey stated they did not use an existing support service because they didn't know where to go. The NMPU brochure 'When someone goes missing' mentioned earlier is a resource that includes some contact numbers in the relevant jurisdiction. In one jurisdiction, policy instructions require the officer in charge of a station to maintain a current register of support services in that local area. Draft guidelines being developed in another jurisdiction include the officer concerned advising the family about available counselling options. It is not appropriate to make the police officer responsible for referring a person for counselling or other support, requiring the officer to assess which people need what support in each case. However, given police are the point of contact early in the missing person episode, strengthening the consistent availability of information about current services so that families and friends, should they choose to do, can readily access or make contact to inquire about such services is appropriate.

Co-ordination of support services

Some overseas countries have national 24 hour specialised missing person support services that provide a variety of functions (eg National Missing Person's Helpline in the UK, Missing Person's Helpline in Ireland, the National Runaway Switchboard in the USA). For example, National Missing Persons Helpline (UK) provides a freecall 24 hour helpline for advice and support by trained personnel, dealing with over 80,000 calls per year. They also service a confidential message home service on a freecall line, assist with posters of missing persons, and obtain publicity and media interest for families through the organisation's media links. As well, they provide operational police support through their national computerised register of missing people and their reconstruction and age-progression facilities. The organisation is fully funded through charity donations and staffed by 21 salaried employees and more than 50 unpaid volunteers. Demand for their services is expanding, and the organisation is currently seeking the equivalent of over three million dollars Australian to stabilise its finances.

Establishing such a centralised multi-function model in Australia would be a costly exercise, but warrants further exploration. Given the range of expressed support needs and the diversity of missing person circumstances, no single support service or approach could be expected to address each area effectively. While there are obvious benefits in having a single agency specialising in missing person issues there is also the danger that the crisis demands and high numbers of, for example, parents with missing children, will overshadow the different needs of other groups. An alternative model is to acknowledge the diversity of needs and circumstances and to enhance the capabilities of existing support services to better address missing person issues of people in their client base.

Coordination between the diverse support services is critical, both to share and develop best practices, but also to identify whether there are groups or needs that fall 'between the cracks'. The coordinating committee model discussed further below provides a framework that could either incorporate direct representation from key counselling groups, or provide a channel of communication to those groups.

Police policy and practice

Overall, the perception of families and friends about the service received from police is very positive. Most stated they were satisfied with the way in which the initial reporting stage, the investigation stage, and reporting of final outcome were handled by police. However, two issues were commonly raised as areas for improvement - delays in taking action when first reporting the person missing to police, and contact with families and friends to provide feedback on what is happening and what is being done after the report is made. In both cases this appears to be a matter of practice rather than designated policy. No State or Territory's written policy or procedural manuals

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...A simple phone call to reassure families and friends that something is happening or that someone is taking an interest can often make a huge difference to the distress or helplessness experienced by many families...

specify a 24 hour waiting period, and in a number of jurisdictions, there is a specific requirement to maintain regular contact with the reporting person.

24 hour delay period

Given the return rates by missing people and the time in which most are located, it is not surprising that some police elect to defer police action for an initial 24 hour period. Police clearly need to prioritise their resources to deal with the diversity of community demands for police response. However, to give the impression that there is a standard practice of waiting 24 hours before any action is able to be taken as a matter of course is neither appropriate to the distress felt by many families and friends at that time, nor consistent with police policy in any jurisdiction. No police policy or procedural manuals prescribe such a time period, and, in some jurisdictions, it is specified that the officer is to immediately initiate inquiries aimed at locating the missing person. The issues of taking a report immediately and acting quickly to investigate are often addressed in training and reinforced by missing persons unit staff, but, as identified in the survey, continue to occur across Australia. Police practice in this area should be reviewed for compliance with policy and policies reviewed if necessary to clarify intent and reinforce appropriate practice in this area, preferably to an agreed national standard.

Regular contact and feedback

Regular contact and feedback by police is both an area cited by families and friends as one for improvement, but also identified as a particular source of satisfaction when it does occur. A simple phone call to reassure families and friends that something is happening or that someone is taking an interest can often make a huge difference to the distress and feelings of helplessness experienced by many families. Timely contact and information feedback about what is being done and what will happen is critical in the period immediately after the missing person is reported and ongoing supportive contact is important in cases where the person is missing for a longer time period. Policy and procedure instructions in several jurisdictions specifically require the investigating officer to maintain regular contact with the person making the report. The appropriate frequency of such contact and ensuring practice complies with policy should be reviewed in each jurisdiction.

Interpersonal approach and attitude by police officers

The attitude of the individual officer taking the report is also a commonly identified issue, more often as something the families and friends found particularly helpful, rather than an area identified for improvement. A sympathetic and supportive approach can help alleviate some of the suffering experienced by families and friends and is often remembered very

positively long after the incident. The importance of presenting a supportive and non-judgemental approach in dealing with families and friends of missing people needs to be continually reinforced.

National consistency

These three issues for police practice - timeliness, feedback, and interpersonal manner - are not specific to missing person incidents. They are commonly identified as sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction with police services in other opinion surveys and research. A more specific area of police practice is the issue of telephone reporting. Two jurisdictions - ACT and SA - take reports of missing persons over the telephone while other jurisdictions generally require someone to attend a police station to make the report. This could become a particular problem when someone goes missing in another jurisdiction, and the family member is referred to the interstate police service to make the report directly, but that jurisdiction does not take a report by phone. A related issue is ensuring which jurisdiction takes responsibility for maintaining contact and providing feedback to the reporting person. The issue of nationally consistent policies and procedures and standardised recording of information across jurisdictions has, and is continuing to be, addressed by the Police Consultative Group on Missing Persons.

Another national consistency issue is consistent investigative and reporting standards and performance evaluation systems. As noted earlier in this report, the method of calculating location rates varied between jurisdictions. Some jurisdictions do not actually report on missing person reporting or location rates in any systematic way, either internally or publicly through annual reports. Nationally consistent performance indicators and standards should be developed to assist in identifying best practice and evaluating different approaches to preventing and resolving missing person cases. Other issues of national consistency that have been or are being addressed by jurisdictions through the NMPU forums include national reporting and investigative standards. These include, for example standard definition of what is counted as a missing person case for statistical purposes, minimum standards for preliminary investigations, and standards for follow-up investigations after 7 days.

Access to government information

Where a person is missing for any length of time, one of the only means of tracing that person, or of identifying whether the person is alive or not, is to check whether and where someone of that name has accessed government services such as social security benefits or allowances or health care facilities. For example, police in one State cited the example of a 16 old pregnant girl missing for 18 months. Because of her pregnancy, she would obviously have been

using health services, and Medicare information would have provided key information to help locate her more quickly, thereby saving police resources over a significant period of time, reducing her family's distress, and potentially benefiting the missing girl and her own child.

However, there are strict legislative controls over such information in order to protect the privacy of the individual concerned, either in the form of general privacy legislation or specific acts governing that particular department's operations. In both cases, the legislation provides for exemptions that allow the release of such information in designated circumstances.

Section 1314 of the Social Security Act 1991 provides a power for the Secretary (in accordance with guidelines determined by the Minister) to disclose departmental information if he or she certifies it is in the public interest to do so, either in a particular case or particular class of cases. Section 130 of the Health Insurance Act 1973 also provides for Ministerial discretion to release information 'if it is necessary in the public interest'. The privacy principles in the Privacy Act 1988 provide for the release of personal information where it is required or authorised by or under law, but also where the record-keeper believes on reasonable grounds the use of that information 'is necessary to prevent or lessen a serious and imminent threat to the life or health of the individual concerned or another person'. There appears to be adequate legal provision in all three acts to allow the disclosure of government information in missing person cases. It is therefore a matter of policy as to what information and under what circumstances it is released.

The issue of access to government information is already under review by the Australian Senate Select Committee on Information Technologies. Hopefully the recommendations of that inquiry will address the concerns of tracing agencies and families and friends of missing persons in a manner that properly balances the privacy rights of an individual with the wider public interest. In particular, access to Medicare information in a range of missing person cases needs to be addressed. Access by non-police tracing services to Commonwealth and to State and Territory government information is also an issue. It is already acknowledged by the National Advisory Committee on Missing Persons and the representatives of the three non-police tracing services on that committee, that a national system of accreditation including adherence to agreed accountability standards needs to be put into place to govern access granted for non-government organisations.

The timeliness of access to government information is also important. Sometimes, information is urgently required to follow-up a particular lead. For example, in one case of a missing mother, there was a possibility early in the investigation that the missing woman may have had a mini-stroke and was possibly travelling about in a disoriented state. There was a lead early in the police investigation that a woman of similar age, physical

description, and wearing similar clothing and jewellery was sighted on a train travelling to a region of the State that the missing woman had previously lived. She was apparently travelling on a pension card. However, it took five days to access the government information that determined this could not have been the missing woman.

Improved access by police and accredited non-police tracing agencies to government information sources that can assist in locating a missing person or in determining whether that person is safe and well is critical. Ideally, this should be supported by specific legislative amendment over time. Using the discretion already available under some legislation within a policy framework that more appropriately balances the privacy rights of the individual with public interest considerations that put greater priority on reducing the distress and trauma of families and friends of missing persons could be done now.

Property and other legal issues

An area causing particular problems in some missing person cases, and potential problems in others where the families and friends may be unaware of the legal implications, is dealing with the missing person's property and assets. Until the missing person is legally declared dead or some other legal avenue is effected regarding guardianship, the missing person is still the legal owner of his or her property and assets. That means the family cannot legally sell or dispose of it, or in some cases use it without possible adverse consequences. For example, one family was advised against driving the missing person's car as insurance cover could be voided in the event of an accident simply because the car was not being driven with the permission of the owner. In one instance, the only avenue available to the family to deal with a long-term missing parent's empty house and other property was to apply to the supreme court for probate at a cost of \$10,000, which the family simply could not afford. They therefore have the continuing cost (both financial and emotional) of having had to maintain the missing mother's house, car and other property for years.

As cited by this daughter of a missing person: "The healing process can never really begin because there is no resolution. The rituals associated with the death of a loved one are denied us. The law requires us to pretend that time stands still. The house must remain unattended, the car idle in the garage. What do you do about life insurance and superannuation? What does a spouse do about their joint pension entitlements? How do parents deal with their wills? Money left to missing children by loving grandparents sits in trusts unclaimed."(Hansard, 1997).

There does not appear to be any existing cost-effective method open to families and friends to deal with these sorts of outstanding property and legal issues. Establishing a 'Missing Person's Ombudsman' has been suggested by one missing person's group. Another option may be to amend legislation to allow

...It is critical that this national coordination function continue to be resourced and supported to the extent necessary to undertake functions...

an existing body, for example a guardianship board, to be able to make some determination in such cases. It may be simply that this matter is not being recognised yet as an issue that needs to be resolved by those people empowered to address it, despite the best efforts of individual families affected and of groups supporting them to advocate for such change. Whatever mechanism is determined at individual State and Territory level, information and referral mechanisms need to be established to ensure affected people are aware of the appropriate avenues to pursue.

Cost-effective avenues for families and friends of missing persons to legally resolve problems inherent in dealing with a long-term missing person's property and assets where there is no existing authority such as a power of attorney or joint ownership need to be established and their availability publicised.

Structure and coordination

National coordination

A national approach is critical. As with any Australian social issue, the problem does not confine itself to any State or Territory boundary. Missing people go missing while travelling interstate or may travel to other jurisdictions while missing, necessitating coordination between States and Territories to locate them. In those few cases where a person is missing because of suspected abduction or homicide, it is even more important to have an Australia-wide approach. Best practice in prevention strategies or service delivery by agencies needs to be shared, so that each jurisdiction does not 're-invent the wheel' as can often happen in other areas. There are also obvious benefits in a coordinated national approach to raising awareness about missing person issues generally and calling for assistance in resolving outstanding missing person cases through initiatives such as Missing Persons Week.

The National Missing Persons Unit (NMPU) was established specifically to provide such national coordination and has achieved much in its first three years of operation given its modest staffing and resources. In the opinion of the researchers it is critical that this national coordination function continue and be resourced and supported to the extent necessary to undertake those functions.

A national structure not only optimises the coordination of available jurisdictional resources, but can also be an effective point for locating and providing shared resources. For example, in the policing area particular investigative tools may be useful in a small number of cases but not be cost effective for individual jurisdictions to maintain. The NMPU already provides operational support to jurisdictions by maintaining the Violent Crime Linkage Analysis System (ViCLAS), a database of any missing person outstanding for more than 60 days or, where there are identified suspicious circumstances, for less than 60 days. Other operational support tools being considered include age enhancement techniques.

At a policy and strategic level, forums such as the National Advisory Committee on Missing Persons and the Police Consultative Group on Missing Persons, established and serviced by the NMPU, provide an opportunity for agency representatives to develop a coordinated strategic approach, develop consistent policies and procedures where appropriate, and exchange best practice information. Both committees have been effective in improving coordination between agencies and across jurisdictions. However, it may be useful to review the structure and representation on those committees to ensure all relevant agencies and key community groups are involved. It is also important to ensure that individual representatives not only have the appropriate knowledge and experience in the area of missing persons, but are also given the authority to represent and commit their agency to a national course of action.

Jurisdictional coordination committees

Two jurisdictions - NSW and Victoria - have a missing person committee comprising representatives from relevant government and non-government organisations and community groups as well as members of families of missing persons. Such committees provide a useful forum for coordination and a partnership approach to missing person issues at the jurisdictional level, as well as a structure that facilitates coordinated input to the national body. They also provide a mechanism for State based self-help groups or single-issue community groups to be recognised at jurisdictional level and perhaps take advantage of resources mobilised by the State coordinating group. Such committees establish a formal avenue to have individual and group concerns considered and possibly addressed at the State level as well as, where appropriate, having their issues raised and lobbied for at the national level given such a committee's level of access to, and representation on, national bodies. Establishing coordinating committees in each State or Territory similar to the NSW or Victorian bodies should be considered.

Inter-agency coordination

Coordination between agencies, particularly police, the non-government tracing services, and organisations that either hold relevant information or service a client population that may include missing persons is also important. The specific issue of access to government information is dealt with above as a separate issue. This section deals with coordination between agencies on operational and policy matters.

It is the perception of most of the departments and non-government agencies consulted that inter-agency relations are working effectively and, in some cases, have improved a great deal in recent years. In a very few cases, families and friends of missing persons interviewed or surveyed have mentioned problems they experienced in this area, usually between police

and the department responsible for youth and family services. However, overall, from a national perspective, working arrangements between agencies appear to be effective at the operational level, although the issue of better information sharing between police, the department responsible for family and youth services, and youth shelters has been identified in more than one jurisdiction. In one State, this issue is being formally addressed in a working party of representatives from government, shelter managers and youth groups.

Intra-agency coordination

Intra-agency coordination was raised as an issue by some families. In a small number of cases, they mentioned, for example, that they had advised one police section that the missing person had been located, only to be contacted later by another section and asked whether the person was still missing. In other cases, there were concerns that the police officer taking the initial missing person report was the only person at the station aware of the incident, because, when families rang to get feedback about the status of the investigation, other officers were apparently unaware of the case. This made the families feel as if nothing were being done to locate the missing person, and contributed unnecessarily to their distress. This may be simply a matter of information failing to be passed on between officers on different shifts, or between the local police station and the jurisdiction's missing persons unit in a small proportion of cases, or a lapse in record keeping. However it was a very salient issue for those few families that raised it, causing them to question police efficiency and reducing their confidence in police ability to effectively deal with their case. Police policies generally refer to supervisor and officer responsibilities in hand-over of information. As with other areas mentioned earlier, it is practice rather than policy that needs to be reinforced.

Education and public awareness

A better level of understanding in the community generally and government agencies specifically was also identified by a number of families, particularly those interviewed who had a family member missing for a lengthy period of time. It should be acknowledged that a great deal of practical and economic support has been given through sponsorship (eg by communication providers during Missing Persons Week) but also in many individual cases by all sorts of organisations when the person is first missing. For example, in one highly publicised case, a father was given free of charge mobile phone services, posters and billboard advertising space. However, as the missing person incident continues, this sympathy, understanding, and tolerance tapers off. For example, in this same case, the father reported a less sympathetic response when business tax returns were submitted late.

Community attitudes

Promoting greater awareness within the community as a whole of the ongoing impacts and stresses on families and friends of missing persons may help to alleviate some of the difficulties encountered by some families because the ongoing nature of those stresses is not well understood. Generating public awareness among community groups and the community at large about missing person issues is an area already being addressed by the National Missing Persons Unit and its associated advisory committees at the national level and by the two State level coordinating committees and police and tracing services at jurisdictional level.

Agency philosophy

A greater acknowledgment of missing person issues within government departments has already been discussed in relation to access to government information. Another area is awareness and acceptance of the extent and severity of impacts on families and friends that can arise because young people seek to exercise their rights to an independent lifestyle and privacy by 'going missing' needs to be promoted in some community and youth service sectors. A number of families during interview have stressed the difficulties they experienced in dealings with youth workers and their feelings that the family's needs were totally invalidated. This need for a more balanced approach to mediating the different perspective's of family and missing young person was also supported in consultation with some agencies, including case workers themselves.

Understanding by missing people themselves

A better understanding of the missing person phenomenon and its associated impacts may also help to prevent or reduce the length of time that a person voluntarily stays missing. By reducing the number of missing person cases, sometimes through the simple expedient of the missing person just making contact to advise family or friends he or she is safe and well, police resources can be focused on those cases requiring police investigation because of suspected abduction or injury.

Expectations on police

This awareness also needs to include a better understanding by families and friends of missing persons of the police role and restrictions, so that there are not unrealistic expectations about police capabilities and powers that, when not met, contribute to the distress of families and lower their confidence in police. In particular, the fact that police are not empowered to force a child or young person to return home in most circumstances or to detain a missing person until family are able to retrieve them are not well understood.

...Promoting greater awareness within the community as a whole of the ongoing impacts may help to alleviate some of the difficulties encountered by some families...

The sensationalising of specific missing person cases and any unbalanced presenting of missing person issues generally can feed public perceptions and safety fears for any and all missing persons when this is not necessarily warranted under the particular circumstances.

The media's approach

The role of the media also warrants special mention. While some families report very positive and helpful experiences with the media, others have felt hounded and harassed and their distress compounded by unwanted or inappropriate media attention. The media, and the community in general, needs to take a more responsible and understanding approach to the issue of missing persons. These issues have been well documented elsewhere (Wilson & Lincoln, 1995)

The media also has a unique role in that it is often the only source that the general community has to learn about missing person issues. The sensationalising of specific missing person cases and any unbalanced presenting of missing person issues generally can feed public perceptions and safety fears for any and all missing persons when this is not necessarily warranted under the particular circumstances. The reality is that the vast majority of people go missing of their own accord, for a short period of time, and are located or return without suffering any harm. The fact that about 28,500 people are reported missing to police in Australia each year does not mean Australia is not a safe place to live, and sensationalising missing person issues, will only exacerbate the initial trauma felt by many families and friends when someone goes missing.

General public awareness strategies

Raising general awareness about missing persons and promoting a better understanding of the relevant issues nationally is one of the NMPU's objectives. Much has been done to develop a national coordinated approach and to provide support material and information for use by States and Territories as well as utilising mediums like the Internet. Partnerships with community groups and the business sector are being developed and sponsorship options explored. Much has been achieved by the NMPU in its three years of operation but there is also a great deal of scope for further developing and implementing national awareness strategies in the future, given appropriate support and resourcing for, and continuing operation, of the unit. The efforts of other agencies and of police and missing person groups and committees at jurisdictional level also need to be acknowledged and supported.

Prevention

Obviously, the most effective way to reduce the distress for families and friends of missing persons is for the incident never to have happened. Little is known about effective prevention strategies and, given the diversity of reasons for and circumstances under which people go missing, there is clearly no single solution. Given the large proportion of children and young persons who go missing each year, strategies targeted at teenage 'runaways' will have a significant impact on overall rates, but will also avoid

a great deal of trauma and distress for parents and other family members. Education and awareness raising about the consequences of running away and of the alternatives available to taking this step may help. The national availability of confidential counselling and advisory services to children and young persons, such as Kids Helpline, provides an avenue for young people to explore alternative ways of dealing with family conflict or difficulties other than running away.

Making contact

If it is not possible to prevent the incident, it is still possible to dramatically reduce the adverse impact on families and friends by minimising the length of time that people are missing and believed to be at risk of harm. Family fears and distress can be substantially allayed if the missing person simply makes contact to let someone know he or she is safe and well. The most common response by families and friends in the survey to the question on what would have helped at the time was 'just a phone call'. Reinforcing that message at any opportunity is paramount.

It is also important to provide a readily available avenue by which missing people can advise others they are safe and well without the necessity of making personal contact, as in some cases the missing person, for whatever reason, will not want to make direct contact with a family member. The UK's National Missing Persons Helpline operates a freecall confidential 'Message Home' service across the country. That helpline allows anyone to leave a message that will be passed on to a relative, social worker, or friend.

A message home service has also operated at different times in various Australian jurisdictions but is not currently coordinated nationally and telephone numbers to access the service publicised in some recent publications are now no longer correct. Ideally, a message home service should be nationally available on a toll-free number and affiliated with an organisation that has the infrastructure and mandate to provide continuity to such a service. Such a service could be located within, or auspiced by, whatever structure is determined for dealing with information support to families and friends as discussed earlier in this report.

Some specific initiatives

A number of innovative prevention and 'consequence-minimisation' strategies were identified during consultations for this research, operated by community organisations, sometimes in conjunction with government departments or the private sector. For example, the Dementia or Alzheimers Association and police operate a 'Safe Return' program in at least two jurisdictions. Helpful explanatory and prevention information is provided by a number of support associations, for example, the Alzheimers Association's help-note on wandering. Rotary International have, for some years, operated the Lost

and Missing Person (LAMP) scheme in NSW. There are also examples of police initiatives, such as school poster competitions for Missing Person Week, aimed at prevention and public awareness.

Initiatives in related areas, for example the Youth Homeless Pilot Program which is testing early intervention strategies to assist young people at risk of homelessness re-engage in family, work and community life, may also identify effective strategies to help prevent young people becoming missing persons.

As with crime prevention, many initiatives are being developed at local level but information about their operation and effectiveness is not always available outside that local base. Establishing State and Territory coordinating committees creates a structure for identifying and passing on information about such initiatives for exchange at the national level. The NMPU and its national committees are well placed to act as a 'clearinghouse' for identifying and promulgating information about effective local strategies that might be applied nationally or publicised more widely.

Given the high rate of repeat incidents by a proportion of children and young people, preventing repeat incidents is a real issue. The same issues apply here as for prevention strategies.

Research, monitoring and evaluation

Given the diversity of missing person cases identified, effective prevention strategies need to be tailored to the specific characteristics of the person, the circumstances under which they may go missing, and the reasons prompting the disappearance. The reasons why people go missing need to be better understood. Ideally, reporting systems should record some minimal information that would assist in developing and evaluating prevention strategies. Both the Salvation Army and Victoria Police computerised recording systems have a field that records information about reason for going missing and which can be retrieved for statistical analysis and evaluation research without recourse to a massive manual coding task of narrative information. Establishing an effective balance between collection of information that is operationally useful and information relevant for strategic planning and research purposes is a difficult task in any area. This might, however, be a useful area for national standards, and one that could be considered by the Police Consultative Group on Missing Persons in its future deliberations about nationally consistent procedures.

There is an obvious need for monitoring, research and evaluation to identify and promulgate information about what works for who under what circumstances in preventing missing person incidents and in minimising the impacts and consequences if someone does go missing.

Further research

This study is only a first step in meeting the need for research-based information on a range of missing person issues. As with any research, addressing some questions raises others that couldn't be answered within the scope of this study and the time available to it. In particular, the impacts on missing persons themselves could be explored only indirectly, through information provided by families and friends. The need for further research to identify effective prevention strategies and for ongoing evaluation of existing services has already been identified.

Summary

To summarise, the priority areas for action identified in this study based on interviews with families and friends and consultations with government and non-government agencies and community groups are considered to be (not presented in order of priority):

- information and practical advice to assist families in searching;
- specialised training in unresolved grief counselling and missing person support needs;
- training in missing person issues for telephone counselling service providers;
- promoting understanding of missing person issues among special need support groups;
- establishment of specialised self-help groups for families of long-term missing persons;
- strengthened information and referral systems at reporting stage;
- delays before commencing appropriate police action;
- regular contact and feedback about progress by police;
- nationally consistent standards and procedures;
- access to government information for tracing purposes;
- cost-effective avenues to resolve legal problems of missing person property and assets;
- continuing operation of the National Missing Persons Unit;
- establishment of coordinating committees in each State and Territory;
- nationally coordinated public awareness and education strategies;
- integration of message home programs within a structure ensuring continuity and national availability;
- a balanced, positive, and sympathetic media approach;
- awareness of missing person issues, especially post-location reconciliation, by agencies providing intervention or support services to missing persons or families for wider issues; and
- research to identify, develop and evaluate effective targeted prevention programs.

CONCLUSION

The phenomenon of missing persons affects many people apart from the immediate family. It impacts on a wide range of people who know the missing person, but also touches government departments, non-government organisations, the business sector, and the community at large in a variety of ways. On a purely economic basis, there is a large financial impact on the Australian community. However the social, emotional, and relationship impacts can be profound and pervasive. Finding ways to reduce, or preferably to avoid, the traumas and the costs associated with missing people is one that needs to be addressed by everyone - families, friends, departments, agencies, government policy makers, media, and by missing people themselves. We need to take responsibility as a community for resolving these issues.

...On a purely economic basis, there is a large financial impact on the Australian community...

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APPENDICIES

APPENDIX 1: List of organisations consulted

Alzheimers Association (NSW, VIC, QLD) Anglicare (SA, WA) ARC Search Services Association for Relatives & Friends of the Mentally Ill (QLD) Association for Self Help Organisations and Groups (NSW) Association of Loss & Grief (WA) Attention Deficit Disorder Info & Support Services (QLD) Australian Bureau of Statistics Australian Customs Service (National Office, Coastwatch QLD) Australian Federal Police (ACT Region, National Response Centre) Australian Institute of Criminology Australian Institute of Health and Welfare Australian Search and Rescue Australian Red Cross (NSW, VIC) Bereaved Through Suicide Support Group (SA) Brain Injury Association of Queensland Collective of Self Help and Social Action Groups (VIC) Crisis Line (VIC) Dementia Association (Sunshine Coast) Inc. Department of Community Services, NSW (Kings Cross Adolescent Services, Child Protection & Family Crisis Service) Department of Families, Youth and Community Care, QLD (Crisis Care, central and regional offices) Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade Department of Health and Family Services (Quality Practice Section, Youth Homeless Pilot Program Secretariat) Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs Empty Arms Network Families, Youth and Child Services, NT Gay and Lesbian Youth Services Gold Coast Youth Services Gordana Kotevski Trust Fund Greyhound/Pioneer Bus Lines (responsible for Home Free program) Health Insurance Commission Hanover Welfare Services (VIC) Homicide Victim Support Group (SA) Hostel Industry Development Unit, Dept. Justice (QLD) Industry Commission Institute of Family Studies International Social Services (National Office, NSW Regional Office) Kids Helpline (National Office, VIC) Labour Council of NSW Lifeline (National Office, VIC, SA, TAS) Link-Up Lutheran Community Care (SA) Mental Health Information Service (NSW) Missing Persons Committee NSW Inc. Mothers Union, Diocese of Melbourne (previously responsible for Message Home, VIC) National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children, USA (through NMPU) National Institute of Labour Studies National Missing Persons Helpline, UK (through the NMPU) National Missing Persons Unit. New South Wales Association for Mental Health Inc New South Wales Police Service Northern Territory Police, Fire and Emergency Services Parentline (QLD) Parents Affected by Youth Homelessness (VIC) Parent Information and Referral Service (WA) Parent Helpline (WA) Parent Support Line (ACT) Queensland Network of Self Help Organisations and Groups Queensland Police Service Relationship Australia (QLD) Rotary International (Berowa) Royal Brisbane Hospital Royal Melbourne Hospital Rotary International (NSW) Salvation Army (Eastern Territory, Southern Territory, Queensland office) Schizophrenia Fellowship (NSW, QLD) Seasons For Growth (QLD) Self Help Information Network (NSW) Self Help Organisations United Together (ACT) State Emergency Services (WA) South Australia Police Department South East Queensland Youth Accommodation Coalition St. Bartholomew Nathaniel House (QLD) Survivors of Suicide Bereavement Support Group (QLD) Sydney City Council Homeless

Persons Information Centre Tasmania Police Teen Challenge (QLD, WA) The Compassionate Friend (QLD) Tough Love (QLD) Victim Support Services Inc. (SA) Victoria Missing Persons Committee Inc. Victoria Police Wayside Chapel of the Cross Western Australia Police Western Institute of Self Help Youth Advocacy Centre (QLD) Youth Emergency Services (QLD) Youth Hotline (QLD)

Also, the following people were contacted in a personal capacity, given their contribution to research relevant to this report:

Scott Ewing, Bruce Swanton, Professor Paul Wilson, Professor Mark Wooden

APPENDIX 2: Detailed description of methodology and sampling framework:

Sampling framework for the survey:

Approximately 28,500 missing reports were made to police across Australia each year over the past 3 years. A 1% sample was considered large enough to provide information on the diversity of missing person cases and to allow inferences to be drawn about the national missing person population from overall sample descriptors. The target sample was 300 cases, selected across states and territories in direct proportion to the number of missing person reports made in each jurisdiction in 1997.

Cases were randomly selected over a 6 month time period of 1 September 1996 to 28 February 1997. The selected time period needed to be long enough to allow for long term missing cases to be included and long term impacts to be sampled, but recent enough in time to allow respondents to remember the incident and its effects in adequate detail. A minimum of 12 months was considered an appropriate balance. However, to avoid unnecessary distress to respondents by interviewing them on or near the anniversary of the disappearance of the missing person, it was decided to extend the minimum period to 13 months. To avoid any seasonal effects that might bias the type of missing person incident (eg the Christmas period, school holidays or exam periods) cases were randomly selected over a 6 month period.

Because the survey was intended to identify impacts on families and friends of missing persons, incidents where a person was reported missing from an institution of some kind by a staff member (whether hospital, aged care facilities, youth centres, or other) were excluded. Because the survey was to be conducted by telephone interview, cases where no current phone number was available on police records were also excluded.

To allow for refusals and non-contacts, the initial sample frame was 400 cases. The basis for selecting cases varied according to the size of the jurisdiction and whether the cases were to be identified by manual or computer generated processes. In the two smaller jurisdictions (TAS and NT) police were asked to select the first case reported on or after the first of each month over the 6 month period

that was not a report relating to a person reported missing from an institution. ACT was asked to select the first case each month and 20th case in each alternate month. In those other jurisdictions selecting cases from manual records, they were asked to select the first case reported on or after 1 September that was not a report of a person missing from an institution and then every 40th subsequent case. If any case at the 40th interval was a report of a person missing from an institution, the immediately next case that met the criteria was to be chosen, and then returning to the original 40th interval case.

Where jurisdictions were planning to use a computer-generated list, they were asked to generate a list of each 20th case, and to screen that list by excluding any persons reported missing from institutions. Selecting each 20th case allowed for a 50:50 ratio of institution to non-institution reports. In the two jurisdictions where annual or monthly statistics provided a breakdown of institution and non-institution reports, the proportions are one-quarter and one-third. The selected ratio was considered to therefore provide adequate numbers for other jurisdictions where there was no available information on ratios. Based on extrapolations from annual statistics available at the time of planning the survey, this sampling basis would select the requisite number of cases required for interview per jurisdiction plus an additional 14 to 20 cases in the larger jurisdictions and an extra 3 cases in the three smaller jurisdictions to allow for loss for reasons of refusal or non-contact.

To protect confidentiality, police in each jurisdiction then attempted to contact the person making the missing person report to ask permission for their name and telephone number to be referred to researchers. Police were provided with standard wording to use. This stated that the National Missing Persons Unit had organised a national study into missing persons to research the economic, social and health impacts on the Australian community and to identify ways to locate missing persons more effectively or to better support families and friends of missing persons. They were told the study would involve a confidential telephone interview between 30 to 60 minutes at a time convenient to them. They were also advised that there was no need to make a decision now, police were simply seeking permission to pass on their name and number to the researchers who would then contact them to explain the study and ask whether they would be willing to participate.

Police were asked to attempt to contact each identified reporting person at least 5 times at different times of day and day of week. In several jurisdictions, due to time constraints and hours of operations, contact attempts were limited to weekdays or to only one or two attempts.

An unexpected difficulty was the extremely high rate of cases where the telephone number on the missing person report had been disconnected, or was no longer available, or the person had moved from that address. For reasons of confidentiality it was not considered appropriate to attempt to trace those people through current telephone listings, given the potential for contacting a different person of the same name and therefore inadvertently divulging that someone with the same name had been a reported missing person.

Jurisdictions were asked to make contact with each person on the list of cases selected through the sampling framework for that State or Territory (up to five attempts) until the predetermined quota was reached for that

jurisdiction. In two states, a further 15 and 5 cases were randomly selected because the number of cases contacted and agreeing to take part under the sampling framework did not yield a high enough number for that jurisdiction. One jurisdiction elected to apply a method whereby each case immediately following the 20th was rung until a person was contacted to meet the jurisdiction's quota. In all other cases, the sampling framework provided adequate numbers relative to the jurisdiction's required sample size.

In total, police attempted to contact 690 different people. Of these, 297 (43%) could not be contacted for whatever reason. In 77% of the 209 instances where the specific reason for non-contact was recorded by police, it was because the number had been disconnected or was no longer in use or because the person was no longer at that number rather than because there was no answer to calls at that number. People agreed to have their name referred in 289 of the 690 total cases (42%), refused in 99 instances (14%), and in five cases (0.7%) were not referred for other reasons. In three of those cases command of English by the person answering the phone was judged inadequate to allow informed consent to be made and in two instances the person had died and no-one else was in a position to participate in the survey. Considering only the 393 cases where contact was made gives a refusal rate of 25%, an agreement rate of 74%, and 1% for the five 'other' cases.

Where people contacted by police agreed to have their names referred, police provided the researchers with the name of the missing person, name of the contact person and their relationship to the missing person, contact number, and dates when the person was reported missing and located. Where people refused or were unable to be contacted, age and sex of the missing person and dates reported missing and located were to be included in a pro-forma sheet, but without including any other identifying information. This allowed a comparison of basic demographics of those refusing or unable to be contacted with those agreeing to be interviewed, in order to identify any bias in the interview sample. The five jurisdictions providing that information represented 82% of all cases.

Of the 289 people agreeing to have their names referred to the researcher, 270 agreed to take part in the study and the full interview was conducted. Eight refused when contacted (3%). In three cases there was no answer on 10 or more attempts to contact the person at different days of the week and times of the day over the time available for the interview stage of the study (1%). In another three cases (1%) the relevant person was absent (overseas or interstate) during the time period available for interview and no other family member or person was in a position to do the interview. In one case the number provided had been disconnected even though the interviewer attempted to contact that person within one week of the police contact. In four other cases (1%) contact was made but the interview not completed for a variety of reasons. These were: command of English judged inadequate by the interviewer for understanding the more detailed questions; the person stated they could not remember details of the incident; denial that the person reported missing had been missing at that time; and the person did not have time to complete the interview in full and could not be contacted to complete it at a later time. In the remaining 270 cases, either the person reporting the missing person to police or another adult family member completed the interview in full.

The 270 people interviewed were compared with refusals (either refusing to have their names passed on or subsequently declining to participate in the study) and non-contacts (whether by police or researchers) on age, gender, whether located or still missing, and length of time missing. There were no statistically significant differences (even at the 10% probability level) between the three groups on either gender, age (adult versus under 18), or length of time missing (1 day or less, 2 to 7 days, or over 7 days) using chi-square analysis. Information on whether the missing person was located alive or dead or still missing was provided for all cases by four jurisdictions. Of the three instances where the missing person was located dead, families/friends were interviewed in two cases and refused in one. Of the two cases where the missing person was identified to be still missing, families/friends agreed to be interviewed in both.

The number refusing at interview or unable to be contacted for interview or not interviewed for some other reason were scattered across all States and Territories. The proportion of completed interviews relative to the quota for that jurisdiction calculated from the total number of missing persons reported to police in 1996 was exact or within 10% in four of the five larger jurisdictions. In the fifth State, nine more cases than required were interviewed. This occurred because the quota for each jurisdiction was originally calculated against a total Australian figure based on statistics or estimates provided by each jurisdiction of the annual number of persons reported missing in that jurisdiction. Precise annual figures based on a consistent calendar year breakdown were not available from some jurisdictions until after the interview stage was almost completed. This meant a precise Australian total based on comparable time periods was not available from which to calculate individual State and Territory proportions till after interviews had been completed for several jurisdictions. As a consequence, one jurisdiction is slightly over-represented in the final sample.

To summarise, the survey results are based on a sample of families and friends of missing persons generally proportional to the number of persons reported missing in each state and territory annually. Those interviewed do not differ from those sampled but not interviewed on criteria such as gender and age group or length of time missing.

Survey instrument

A survey questionnaire was developed following initial discussions with police, selected agencies, and families and friends of missing persons about issues and general areas of impact. Survey questions were piloted in interviews with selected families and friends of missing persons nominated by police or the National Missing Persons Unit.

The final interview schedule comprised a series of structured questions for all interviews, plus specific questions according to whether the missing person was located alive, was located dead, or was still missing at the time of interview. Areas covered included:

- basic demographic and other information about the missing person: ie age, gender, relationship to person being interviewed, country of birth, marital status, living arrangements, occupation, any special needs, any prior or subsequent incidents, or details of such incidents;

- a brief description of the incident, including specifics of day and time missing, date reported and located, where last seen or missing from, whether in company with another missing person, initial reason why the person was believed to have gone missing, how long missing for overall, how located, where found or staying while missing, any subsequent explanation given, or what information, if any was helpful in re-location.
- a description of any impacts in five separate areas of health, work, routine activities/quality of life, emotional effects, and relationships, asking specifically for who was affected (self, immediate family member, wider family member, friends, and others), how affected, whether an ongoing impact, and any costs incurred (specifically probing for number of medical consultations and number of days off work); the total number of persons in each area impacted and the number where it was considered to have had a major impact;
- experience with agencies or groups contacted to help locate the missing person, separately for the three areas of making the initial report, the tracing/investigation period, and being advised of the outcome; whether generally satisfied with the service received, any specific matters found helpful, and any areas for improvement;
- experience with support services, specifically which agencies/groups, when and why used, whether generally satisfied with the service received, any specific matters found helpful, and any areas for improvement, and if none used, why?;
- opinion of whether, if a support service specialising in missing persons had been available, it would have been accessed at the time and what would be wanted from such a service;
- details and costs of action taken by family and friends to locate the missing person themselves; and
- general questions to identify the most difficult part of the experience, the most important thing to improve the situation for families and friends of missing persons, and other issues not covered.

The interview took, on average 45 minutes to complete, ranging from 20 minutes to 3 hours. The same interviewer conducted all interviews over a 10 week period.

Missing person population statistics

The number of persons reported missing to police in each of the three years (1995, 1996, and 1997) and the gender and age category (whether adult or juvenile) was requested from police in each jurisdiction. The total number of located missing persons was also requested for each year. Most jurisdictions were able to provide the information broken down by gender and age category based on an analysis of records for that period. In one jurisdiction, providing this information in the format requested would have involved a manual analysis of over 12,000 individual cases. However that jurisdiction provided monthly statistics which were aggregated to provide a calendar year total for all missing persons, and was able to provide figures on a financial year basis broken down by gender and age category for persons reported missing from places other than institutions and totals according to type of institution. This allowed for a fairly accurate judgement to be made about whether the person was an adult or juvenile), and these proportions were extrapolated to the relevant calendar year.

Number of persons located in each year is not routinely compiled across all States and Territories and was not available on a calendar basis for each of the three years for many jurisdictions. For some jurisdictions, computerised records could be searched. However, these systems differ in the manner in which located cases can be identified and counted. There are also differences in what information is maintained on local systems because of different practices in culling or archiving located cases after a designated time period. Compiling location statistics on a comparable basis across Australia would have required a very-resource intensive manual analysis for some states and territories. The manner of calculating location rates therefore varied across states and territories, based on what information could be readily accessed from existing record keeping systems. In some cases, this was done by analysing existing outstanding cases according to whether the person was reported missing in 1995 to 1997 and extrapolating that to determine the number of located persons for each year. For one jurisdiction, information was only available in the form of monthly statistics for 1996 and 1997 (and from June 1995 when the system was commenced). These figures include the number of cases reported during the month outstanding at the end of the month as well as the number of long-term cases (missing over 60 days). An estimate of located persons for the year was made for that jurisdiction by calculating the difference between the number of long term outstanding cases at the first and the last month of the year and adding the monthly average of cases reported during the month outstanding at the end of the month.

Missing persons registered with Salvation Army tracing services were calculated from statistics provided by the Salvation Army from its computerised database, separately for each jurisdiction and year, broken down by origin of application and other categories. Statistics on closed cases broken down by category of outcome were also provided. Australian Red Cross and International Social Service statistics on new cases were provided directly by each agency. ISS location rates were taken from Annual Reports and represent outcome for total cases. To disaggregate tracing requests from other casework would have required a manual search of agency files for each year.

Sample of missing persons reports

Each jurisdiction was asked to forward a copy of the missing person report (and the relevant location report for that person and incident) for any person reported missing to police in that jurisdiction between a minute past midnight on 1 September 1996 up until midnight 7 September 1996, after having deleted names, addresses, or contact numbers of any person mentioned in the report. The time period selected was the first week of the survey sample period. This period was selected to allow for the inclusion of location information about people missing for lengthy periods of time. It was also considered, in consultation with police, to be a reasonably representative time of the year, and not including any major holiday periods or significant events or seasonal effects that might affect reporting or location rates.

One jurisdiction provided information on any person actually identified as having gone missing over that time period, rather than according to the date on which the report was made. This was not considered to affect the representativeness of the sample for that jurisdiction. One jurisdiction was unable to provide copies of reports on every person reported during that week without a very resource intensive manual search. In that jurisdiction, reports for people who have gone missing on a number of previous occasions were filed with the case records on that individual, while those without a case history were filed according to date of report. The estimated number of these reports is less than 5% of the total Australian sample and is unlikely to skew the findings from that analysis in any significant way.



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