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Abstract | Between 2008 and 2015 over 305,000 people were reported missing in Australia, an average of 38,159 reports each year. Youths aged 13–17 years were most likely to go missing; half of all people reported missing between 2008 and 2015 were in this age group and less than 10 percent were children.

More than sixty percent of those who go missing return or are found within 48 hours. Ninety-eight percent are ultimately located, most alive.

Collecting data on the circumstances of those who go missing will assist in developing a national picture of vulnerable population groups and predicting outcomes for these groups.

Missing persons in Australia, 2008–2015

Samantha Bricknell and Lauren Renshaw

In Australia, a missing person is defined as ‘anyone who is reported missing to police, whose whereabouts are unknown and there are serious concerns for their safety and welfare’ (NMPCC 2015). State and territory police are the primary agencies for responding to missing persons reports. Other government and non-government agencies involved in tracing missing persons or assisting families of missing persons, and which often work in collaboration with the police, include the Salvation Army Family Tracing Service, Australian Red Cross Tracing Service and the Department of Foreign Affairs.

The most recent published estimate of the number of missing persons in Australia was approximately 35,000 people, for the period 1 July 2005 to 30 June 2006 (or 170 per 100,000 people in the general population; James, Anderson & Putt 2008). This estimate took into account incidents reported to local police and two non-government search agencies that provided data at the time.

This report, commissioned by the Australian Federal Police (AFP) National Missing Persons Coordination Centre (NMPCC), updates national, state and territory statistics on missing persons. These data will help inform police and those working in the sector identify the characteristics of and outcomes for those reported missing in Australia.

Data collection and data quality

The data used in this study were compiled by the NMPCC from state and territory law enforcement agencies and relate to the period 1 January 2008 to 31 December 2015. The data do not include data from missing persons reports recorded by non-police agencies.

The issue of data quality has been raised in previous reports on missing persons in Australia (see, for example, James, Anderson & Putt 2008). Though there have been improvements in standardising missing persons data nationally—such as better linkages between key variables between jurisdictions—there are still definitional differences and inconsistencies in data recording and data entry that limit the current analysis. The following caveats should be considered when interpreting and comparing data between jurisdictions and different published analyses:

- unit record data were only available from Queensland and the Northern Territory, with the remaining jurisdictions reporting aggregate data. This limited the analysis that could be conducted for this report to basic, descriptive statistics;
- some jurisdictions provided incomplete data, which prevented the presentation of national data for some variables;
- it was not possible to determine which missing persons reports referred to persons that had gone missing more than once per year or over multiple years using the data provided. Hence, multiple missing persons reports may be filed on the same person, and numbers may be inflated as a result. The data presented therefore refer to the number of missing persons reports rather than the number of discrete individuals reported missing, unless stated otherwise;
- with the exception of Queensland, no state's or territory's data differentiated between absconders and missing persons. South Australia and the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) provided aggregate counts of absconders. The definition of an absconder may also vary; however, they generally include people who have gone missing from out-of-home care or a supported care facility, mental health facility or hospital; and
- as the current report does not take into account missing person cases from non-police search agencies, there is a risk the number of those who went missing between 2008 and 2015 has been underestimated. However, this removes the issue of any differences in how police and non-police search agencies define a missing person.

Prevalence of missing persons in Australia

Between 1 January 2008 and 31 December 2015, 305,268 missing person reports were made to Australian state and territory police. An average 38,159 reports were made each year. As noted above, some of these reports concern the same individual, who may be reported missing more than once in any given year or multiple times across different years.

The overall missing persons rate increased from 2008, reaching a peak of 181 reports per 100,000 in 2012 (see Table 1). The rate decreased to 168 per 100,000 in 2015. Rates of reported missing persons varied between jurisdictions. The highest rates were recorded in South Australia (for example, 654 per 100,000 in 2015) but these were artificially inflated because reports of absconders were included in total report counts. Data from the ACT were similarly affected.

Rates in the remaining jurisdictions fluctuated over the eight-year reference period (see Table 1). The rate of missing persons reported in New South Wales, Queensland and Western Australia followed the national pattern, reaching a peak between 2011 and 2013, before decreasing in 2014 and 2015. There was a general downward trend in the rate of missing persons reported in Tasmania between 2008 and 2015 (from 37 to 26 per 100,000) and the Northern Territory (245 to 75 per 100,000). In contrast, the rate increased in Victoria from 125 per 100,000 in 2008 to 169 per 100,000 in 2015.

Table 1: Rate and total number of reported missing by jurisdiction and year, 2008–2015

	Rate (per 100,000)								Total (n)
	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	
NSW	152	164	170	177	170	157	151	147	94,222
Vic	125	108	126	137	149	141	157	169	63,067
Qld	101	107	124	136	142	141	132	114	45,514
WA	68	83	82	81	98	87	69	51	14,943
SA ^a	453	448	535	654	648	713	709	654	79,839
Tas	37	34	27	28	23	22	23	26	1,114
ACT ^b	179	145	160	199	162	119	105	108	4,164
NT	245	141	171	121	87	110	85	75	2,405
Australia	147	148	165	179	181	178	176	168	305,268

a: Includes absconders

b: Number of individuals missing

Note: Based on total number of missing persons reports which may exceed the number of individual persons reported missing. Rates calculated using ABS population estimates (ABS 2016)

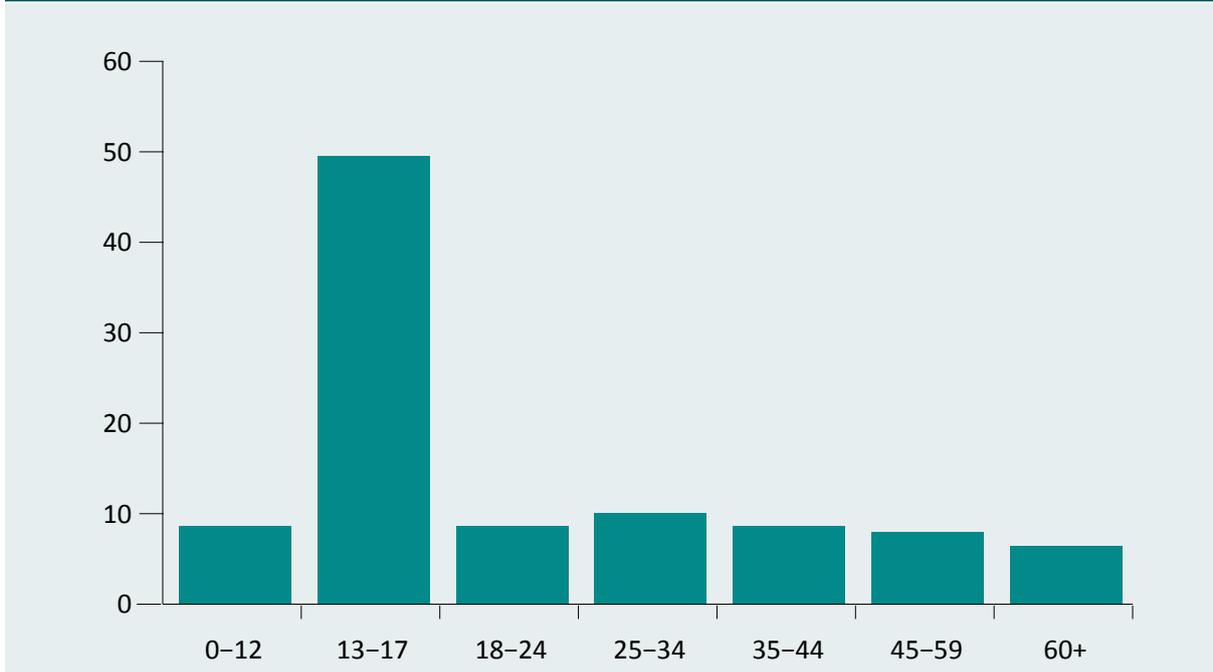
Source: State and territory police data

Characteristics of those who go missing

Age

Between 2008 and 2015, three in five missing persons reports related to a child or young person under the age of 18 (58%; n=133,113; excludes South Australia; see Figure 1). Those aged 13 to 17 years were most likely to go missing; half of all missing persons reports made in the eight-year period where age was recorded related to those in this age group (n=113,366). Nine percent of all missing persons reports related to children aged 0 to 12 years (n=19,747); this proportion is similar to that recorded for missing adults (7–10%).

Figure 1: Reported missing by age group, 2008–2015 (%)^a



a: Excludes South Australia

Note: Excludes missing persons reports where age or date of birth information was not recorded (n=1,572). Based on total number of missing persons reports which may exceed the number of individual persons reported missing

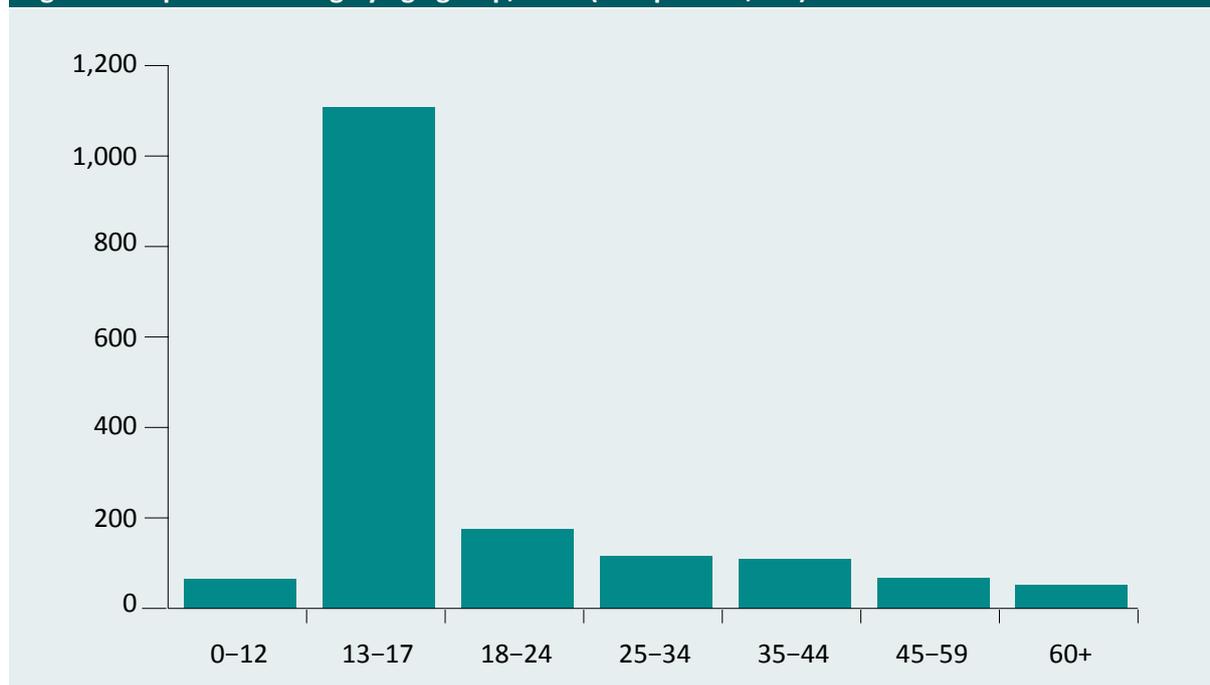
Source: State and territory police data

Previous Australian and international research reflects the large number of young people reported missing. Children and young people accounted for two thirds of missing persons in Australia between 1995 and 1997 (excluding absconders; Henderson & Henderson 1998). Young people made up 43 percent (n=12,874) of all missing persons reported to police in 2005–06 (James, Anderson & Putt 2008). The international literature shows that between 40 and 60 percent of missing persons are young people (Biehal, Mitchell & Wade 2003; Hirschel & Lab 1988; Tarling & Burrows 2004) and up to three quarters of missing persons records in the US relate to people aged less than 18 years (NCIC 2013).

Those aged 13 to 17 years were most likely to be reported missing. In 2015 the rate was 1,109 per 100,000 (excluding South Australia; n=13,016; see Figure 2). This rate, which is 6.5 times the overall reported missing rate for 2015, may be partially inflated by the inclusion of absconders in some jurisdictional data. However, it is not inconsistent with previous findings that show young people go missing at much higher rates than other age groups.

The rate steadily declines as age increases, from 175 per 100,000 for people aged 18 to 24 in 2015 down to 52 per 100,000 for those aged 60 years and over. Children aged 0 to 12 were reported missing at a rate of 65 per 100,000, less than half the rate for young adults.

Figure 2: Reported missing by age group, 2015 (rate per 100,000)



a: Excludes South Australia

Note: Excludes missing persons reports where age or date of birth information was not recorded (n=828). Based on total number of missing persons reports, which may exceed the number of individual persons reported missing

Source: State and territory police data

Trend data on the rates of missing persons reported in each age group are shown in Table 2. These data exclude South Australia. The number of missing persons increased overall for all adult age groups except those aged 60 years and over. For example, the reported missing rate among the 18 to 24 year age group increased by 48 percent between 2008 and 2015, from 118 to 175 per 100,000. The missing rate for the 35 to 44 year age group also increased (82 per 100,000 in 2008 to 110 per 100,000, an overall increase of 34 percent). Rates for children and young people, however, decreased from 2011; between 2008 and 2015 the rate for children declined by a fifth (21%).

Table 2: Reported missing by age group and year, 2008–2015 (rate per 100,000)

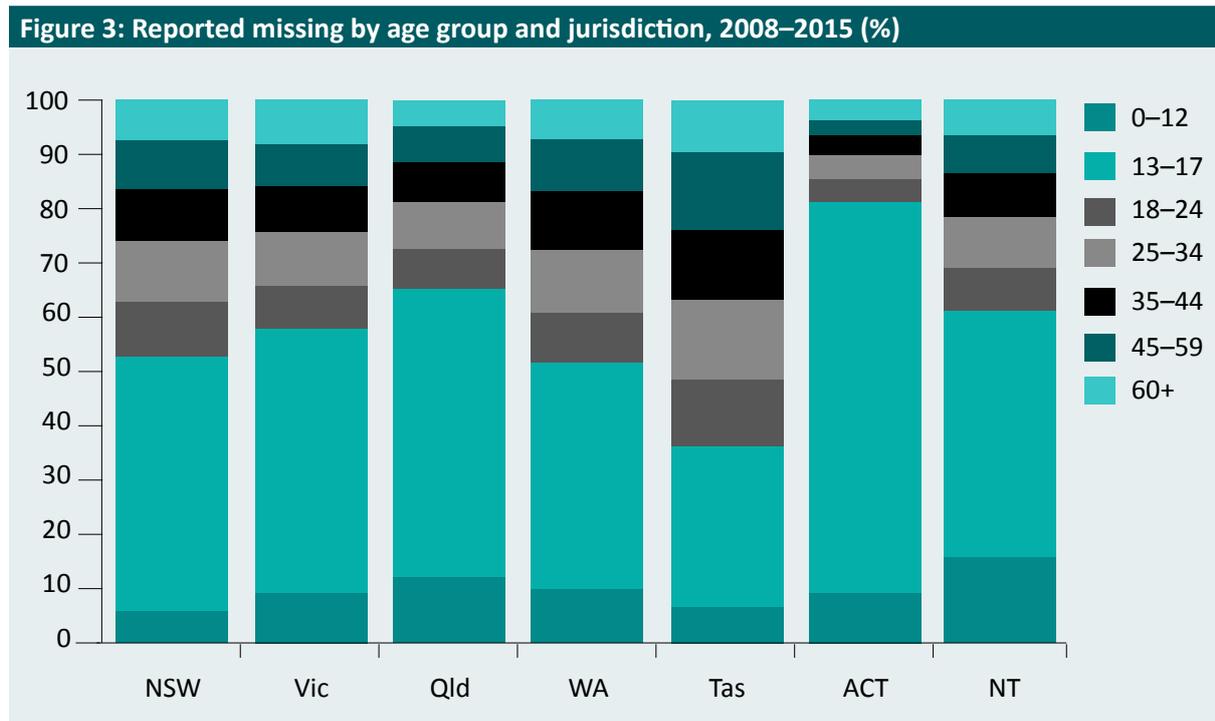
	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
0–12	81.8	77.1	86.8	94.0	88.5	78.7	73.4	65.0
13–17	1,037.1	1,102.3	1,262.7	1,355.9	1,355.9	1,230.4	1,252.1	1,108.5
18–24	118.2	117.9	119.0	128.3	143.1	139.3	142.7	175.4
25–34	99.8	103.3	104.6	108.8	112.6	112.2	105.5	116.4
35–44	82.2	86.1	89.1	96.5	101.7	100.6	101.4	110.1
45–59	56.2	59.9	60.2	64.4	63.8	68.0	66.2	68.1
60 and over	53.9	48.8	52.1	53.2	50.6	51.3	52.4	51.8

a: Excludes South Australia

Note: Excludes missing persons reports where age or date of birth information was not recorded (n=1,572). Based on total number of missing persons reports which may exceed the number of individual persons reported missing

Source: State and territory police data

Age group compositions varied by jurisdiction (see Figure 3). In New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland and the Northern Territory around half of all missing persons were young people aged 13 to 17 years, but these made up just 30 percent of missing persons in Tasmania. The large proportion of young people reported missing in the ACT (72%; n=7,258) is likely due to the inclusion of recidivist absconders in data from this jurisdiction. A greater proportion of children aged 0 to 12 were reported missing in the Northern Territory (16%, n=379), compared with other jurisdictions.



Note: Excludes missing persons reports where age or date of birth information was not recorded (n=1,572). Based on total number of missing persons reports which may exceed the number of individual persons reported missing

Source: State and territory police data

Gender

Forty-seven percent of all missing persons reported between 2008 and 2015 were female (n=114,944; excluding South Australia). In 2005–06, 40 percent of those reported missing to the police were female (James, Anderson & Putt 2008). The gender ratio was largely even in most jurisdictions. A slightly higher proportion of males were reported missing in Tasmania (56% cf 44%) and a higher proportion of females in the ACT (55% cf 45%).

Queensland and the Northern Territory provided unit record data, which allowed for more in-depth analysis of some key variables (see Table 3). Half of all missing persons reported in Queensland and just over half in the Northern Territory were male. However, there was marked variation in the distribution of males and females across different age groups. More than 60 percent of all those reported missing who were aged under 12 or over 25 were boys or men. Conversely, girls aged 13 to 17 years were approximately 60 percent of all missing persons reported in this age group. Similar proportions of males and females were reported missing in the 18 to 24 year age group (ie around 50% each).

Figure 4: Reported missing by sex, 2008–2015 (%)



a: Excludes South Australia

Note: Excludes missing persons reports where gender was not recorded (n=1,093). Based on total number of missing persons reports which, may exceed the number of individual persons reported missing

Source: State and territory police data

Table 3: Reported missing by gender and age group, Queensland and the Northern Territory, 2008–2015

	Queensland				Northern Territory			
	Male		Female		Male		Female	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
0–12	3,170	57.3	2,367	42.7	258	69.2	115	30.8
13–17	9,978	41.3	14,211	58.7	404	37.5	673	62.5
18–24	1,709	51.6	1,601	48.4	97	51.1	93	48.9
25–34	2,328	58.6	1,647	41.4	141	63.8	80	36.2
35–44	1,952	59.2	1,348	40.8	117	61.9	72	38.1
45–59	1,950	63.6	1,116	36.4	116	69.5	51	30.5
60 and over	1,515	70.9	622	29.1	127	81.4	29	18.6
Total	22,602	49.7	22,912	50.3	1,260	53.1	1,113	46.9

Note: Excludes missing persons reports where age and/or gender was not recorded (n=32). Based on total number of missing persons reports which may exceed the number of individual persons reported missing

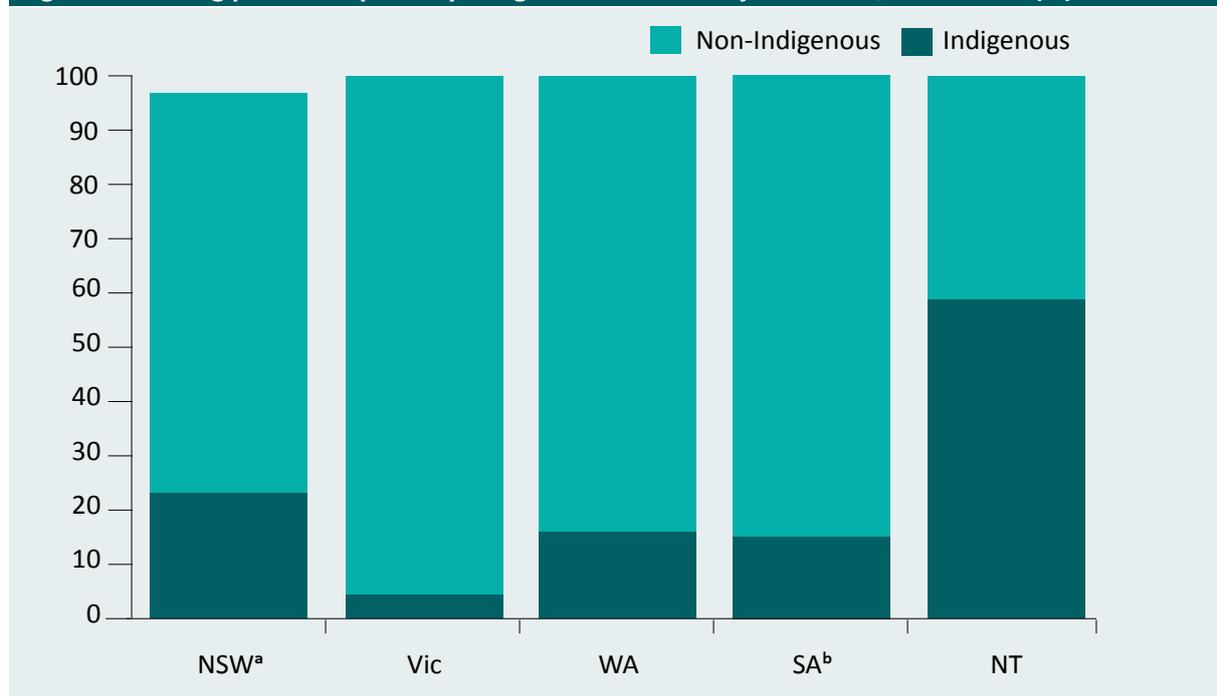
Source: Queensland Police Service and Northern Territory Police Force data

Indigenous status

Data on the Indigenous status of missing persons was only available for New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and the Northern Territory. However, in Victoria, South Australia and the Northern Territory, the Indigenous status of many missing persons was not known, and in New South Wales ‘unknown’ status was not reported. These findings should therefore be treated with caution.

Around six in 10 of those reported missing in the Northern Territory were Indigenous (59%, n=1,239). In New South Wales it was just under a quarter (23%), and in Western and South Australia 15 to 16 percent. New South Wales reported the highest rate of missing Indigenous people at 1,287 per 100,000 population.

Figure 5: Missing persons reports by Indigenous status and jurisdiction, 2008–2015 (%)



a: NSW data did not differentiate between non-Indigenous and unknown Indigenous status. The non-Indigenous total includes reports where Indigenous status was unknown

b: Excludes data for the period 15 September–31 December 2015

Note: Excludes missing persons reports (Vic, WA, SA and NT) where Indigenous status was not recorded (n=16,499). Based on total number of missing persons reports, which may exceed the number of individual persons reported missing

Source: State and territory police data

Circumstances of disappearance

Biehal, Mitchell and Wade’s (2003) study of a sample of cases of people reported missing to the National Missing Persons Helpline (year not specified) estimated that 64 percent of adults and 70 percent of children and young people chose to go missing due to relationship or family breakdown, financial or other life stressors, family and domestic violence, mental illness or suicidal thoughts.

Data on the circumstances of disappearances in Australia between 2008 and 2015, however, was incomplete. Some data were available on those who were known to have been experiencing a mental health condition, or who were potentially suicidal, prior to their disappearance. Between 14 and 17

percent of missing persons reports from New South Wales concerned someone known to have a mental illness, and less than one percent concerned someone who was reportedly suicidal when they went missing. Less than 10 percent of missing persons reports in Queensland and South Australia recorded mental health as an indicator—between four and seven percent and eight and nine percent respectively.

Recidivist missing person

Police data on recidivism rates indicates jurisdictional differences in the proportions of those who had been reported missing on multiple occasions. However, not all law enforcement agencies can identify those who are reported missing more than once per year, and numbers may be inflated as a result of double counting. Caution must again be advised in comparing jurisdictional differences.

Half or more of missing persons reports in New South Wales and Queensland related to people who had been reported missing more than once previously (see Table 5). The proportion was even higher in the ACT, making up two thirds of all reports over the reference period 2008 to 2015. In contrast, the majority of reports in Victoria and the Northern Territory concerned individuals who were missing for the first time. The recidivist rate in the Northern Territory was particularly low compared with other jurisdictions, at 13 percent of all those reported missing.

	1st time missing (n)	Recidivist (n)	Total (n)	Recidivist (%)
NSW	43,866	50,356	94,222	53.4
Vic	34,316	21,401	55,717	38.4
Qld	22,538	22,976	45,514	50.5
ACT	3,299	6,729	10,028	67.1
NT	2,091	314	2,405	13.1

Note: Excludes cases where recidivist status was not recorded (n=7,350). Based on the total number of missing persons reports, which may exceed the number of individual persons reported missing

Source: State and territory police data

Analysis of Queensland unit record data found 47 percent of male (n=10,510) and 54 percent of female (n=12,466) missing persons had been reported missing on multiple occasions (see Table 6). Recidivist rates for each age group show young people (13–17 years) were more likely to be reported missing more than once. More than two thirds of males (69%; n=6,876) and females (69%; n=9,839) in this age cohort were recorded as recidivist missing. Similarly high proportions of children (56% for boys and 57% for girls) were recorded as recidivist missing. This contrasts with adult missing where a fifth of all missing persons, regardless of age group, were reported missing multiple times. In Queensland, a slightly higher proportion of men aged 60 years and over went missing more than once compared with women of the same age (20% cf 15%).

Table 6: Recidivism rates by age and gender, Queensland, 2008–2015			
Male			
	n	% ^a	% ^b
0–12	1,778	56.6	16.9
13–17	6,876	68.9	65.4
18–24	345	20.2	3.3
25–34	454	19.5	4.3
35–44	396	20.3	3.8
45–59	366	18.8	3.5
60 and over	295	19.5	2.8
Total	10,510	–	100.0
Female			
	n	% ^a	% ^b
0–12	1,362	57.5	10.3
13–17	9,839	69.2	62.0
18–24	364	22.7	7.0
25–34	341	20.7	7.2
35–44	225	16.7	5.9
45–59	239	21.4	4.9
60 and over	96	15.4	2.7
Total	12,466	–	100.0

a: Recidivist rate for age group

b: Recidivist rate across age groups

Note: Based on total number of missing persons reports which may exceed the number of individual persons reported missing

Source: Queensland Police Service and Northern Territory Police Force data

Incident outcomes

Most people who are reported missing return or are found within days of the report being made. Data from New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, Tasmania and the ACT show that almost all those reported missing in these jurisdictions between 2008 and 2015 were located (98%; see Table 7). The majority were found alive (93 percent in Tasmania, 96 percent in New South Wales and 99 percent in Queensland and the ACT). The proportion of unresolved reports, where the missing person was not located, ranged from less than one percent in Victoria, Queensland and the ACT, to three percent in New South Wales.

Table 7: Status of those reported missing by jurisdiction, 2008–2015

	Located		Not yet located		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	
NSW	91,132	96.7	3,090	3.3	94,222	
Vic	62,966	99.8	101	0.2	63,067	
Qld	45,449	99.9	65	0.1	45,514	
Tas	1,089	97.8	25	2.2	1,114	
ACT	10,194	99.5	49	0.5	10,243	
Total	147,864	97.8	3,330	2.2	151,194	

Note: Based on total number of missing persons reports which may exceed the number of individual persons reported missing

Source: State and territory police data

In Queensland, resolutions for those reported missing were also compared across age groups (see Table 8). While these numbers are small, adult missing persons were at the highest risk of being found dead. Of the 414 reported missing who were found dead, 95 percent (n=395) were 18 years or older. Just 19 children and young people were found dead. In three to four percent of cases involving middle-aged and elderly adults, the person had died before they were located. More than three quarters of those found dead were male (79%, n=363).

Just 0.1 percent of those reported missing in Queensland (n=65) between 2008 and 2015 were not found. Again, these reports mostly involved middle-aged and older adults.

Table 8: Location status of those reported missing by age group, Queensland, 2008–2015

	Located alive		Located deceased		Not yet located		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	
0–12	5,526	99.8	7	0.1	4	0.1	5,537	
13–17	24,176	99.9	12	0	1	0	24,189	
18–24	3,265	98.6	40	1.2	5	0.2	3,310	
25–44	3,871	97.4	92	2.3	12	0.3	3,975	
35–44	3,228	97.8	60	1.8	12	0.4	3,300	
54–59	2,923	95.3	127	4.1	16	0.5	3,066	
60 and over	2,046	95.7	76	3.6	15	0.7	2,137	
Total	45,035	98.9	414	0.9	65	0.1	45,514	

Note: Based on total number of missing persons reports, which may exceed the number of individual persons reported missing

Source: Queensland Police Service and Northern Territory Police Force data

Tracing missing persons

During the 2008–2015 period, the majority of those reported missing in jurisdictions where data were available were located within a week of being reported missing. Two thirds or more of those reported missing in New South Wales, Queensland and the ACT were located in less than 48 hours (see Figure 6); in Victoria, it was 57 percent (n=35,676) and 49 percent (n=7,016) in Western Australia. In New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland and Western Australia, between 15 and 19 percent of missing persons remained missing for up to a month or more.

Figure 6: Timeframe for location of missing persons by selected jurisdictions, 2008–2015 (%)



Note: Excludes cases where location timeframe was not recorded (n=691). Based on total number of missing persons reports, which may exceed the number of individual persons reported missing

Source: State and territory police data

Discussion

Just over 305,000 missing persons reports were made to state and territory police from 2008 to 2015. Males and females were equally likely to be reported missing. Rates of reported missing, however, contrasted between jurisdictions, as did trends in rates of reported missing over the eight-year reference period. James, Anderson and Putt (2008) reported similar jurisdictional variations, although their study identified a different pattern.

Young people aged 13 to 17 years were reported missing at a rate around six times the national average between 2008 and 2015. In Queensland, where data were available, they were also much more likely to have been reported missing multiple times. International studies suggest a large proportion of young people who go missing are runaways—teenagers who leave home (or another place of residence) because it is difficult or unsafe to remain. Most return home or are soon located, as was the case for young people in this study.

Almost all Australians who are reported missing return or are located alive, but no consistent information was available regarding whether they returned to the place they had left. A similarly high proportion of missing persons cases in the UK were resolved with the person being found—the majority safe and well (Biehal, Mitchell and Wade 2003; Newiss 1999; Tarling & Burrows 2004).

Missing persons taxonomies, such as those developed by Biehal, Mitchell and Wade (2003) and used by the Australian Federal Police and state and territory police, provide schemas for categorising information about missing persons. While data on where and how often specific population groups go missing are generally available, as demonstrated above, there is less information about their

circumstances or why they go missing, why they return (if they do), and the potential outcomes for different categories of missing persons.

These data are equally critical to the formulation of prevention and response strategies, particularly because they relate to high-risk groups as well as population groups (such as adults who go missing to escape family and other pressures) that may not be prioritised in missing persons investigations. As police agencies improve how they record data, further information will become available that will give a clearer picture of why people go missing, and what can be done to both reduce the incidence of disappearances and minimise the consequences for those who go missing.

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