

A summary of the key points from

**“Profiling Missing Persons within  
New South Wales”**

By

**Dr Shaunagh Foy**

PhD thesis submitted

Charles Sturt University

2006

Email: [sfoy6@bigpond.com](mailto:sfoy6@bigpond.com)

### *The Missing Person Problem*

In an environment where the NSW Police Service has to manage reduced budgets and high violent crime rates, NSW police officers are often unable to actively investigate missing persons cases for any length of time. In stranger abduction cases, where victim life expectancy is often only a matter of hours (Steidel, 1994), the NSW Police Service is under incredible pressure to recover the missing person as soon as possible. In NSW twenty-two people are reported missing everyday and, despite 99% of these people returning safely to their homes, 1% do not return or do not return safely (NSW Police Service, Missing Persons, 2000). Whether the case is short- or long-term, missing persons strain the resources of the investigating police force and are costly to the community (Henderson & Henderson, 1998).

### *Lack of Missing Persons research*

Currently, there is no established way for the police to determine if a missing person is the victim of foul play or if that person is likely to shortly return home, and to date no research has been conducted in this area (Henderson et al., 2000; Maxson, Little, & Klein., 1988; Newiss, 1999). Because the research into missing persons is so minimal, there is a lack of understanding as to why people go missing, and who they are (Henderson et al., 2000). Moving beyond stereotypes and making a risk assessment that reflects the real missing person must, therefore, be a priority.

Despite significant advances in knowledge and understanding about the types of persons who run away from home, attempt or complete suicide, and who fall victim to foul play, there is no method by which this information can be integrated. Given that police officers across the state are continually making such determinations on their own, exploring the possibility that runaway, suicide and foul play persons have a unique profile seems worthy of attention.

The research to follow examined all relevant information about missing persons who, on being located, were determined to have run away, suicided or met with foul play. The data was extracted from archived police files of solved missing persons cases and sought to determine if there exists a meaningful and unique profile of factors that allows each type of missing person to be distinguishable from other types. The analyses included an exploration of the differences between groups considered to be potentially important to understanding runaway, suicide and foul play persons.

#### Profiling applied to missing persons cases

In the present research profiling is a methodology used to identify, not who the missing person is, but rather what has happened to the missing person. The challenge in this study was to determine what type of pre-disappearance behaviours and circumstances could be identified without the presence of the missing person, as well as factors relating to the psychological state of the individual.

The present study was concerned only with runaway, suicide and foul play persons because these three categories occur more frequently than do other types of missing persons.

*Profiling as a methodology: Victimology and foul play*

While examination of the motive(s) underlying pre-disappearance behaviour (functional analysis) and behavioural consistency theory are theoretical perspectives guiding the development of a profile, psychological autopsy and victimology theory are tools that further specify relevant detail and appropriate perspective. In the present study, psychological autopsy and victimology are as much a methodology as a theory, due mainly to the emphasis on the practical requirements of data collection. Victimology, a branch of criminology, attempts to understand crime and the criminal in society through increasing knowledge about the victim, rather than the perpetrator of a crime. Turvey defines victimology: "Victimology is first and foremost an investigative tool, providing context, connections, and investigative direction ... Unless we know who a victim is, or was, and how they lived, we cannot say that we truly know the context of their demise, or the events leading up to it" (2002, p. 138-139). The challenge with missing persons cases, however, is that this investigative tool is being used, not to aid the apprehension of the perpetrator in a homicide case, but to determine what reasons the person may have for being missing. This is central to the police officers' task when a missing person report is received (Maxson et al., 1988; Newiss, 1999).

A number of different factors need to be considered when assessing risk for foul play. Turvey (2002) distinguishes between those who are at risk for victimisation by someone known, such as a family member, or someone unknown. Making this distinction is dependent on the person's lifestyle factors, such as being involved in drugs or prostitution, as well as social circumstances, such as being in an abusive relationship. Weighing up these

kinds of factors helps the investigator to determine type of risk. Risk can also be categorised according to what Turvey identifies as lifestyle risk and incident risk. *Lifestyle risk* refers to the missing person's personality, and their personal, professional and social environments. Inspection of the person's routine habits and any other notable circumstances provide the investigator with some idea of whether there was the increased likelihood of harm (see also Cohen & Felson, 1979). Turvey argues that personality is also an important factor contributing towards one's risk for victimisation, and he lists various types of dispositions, such as aggression, impulsivity, and depression, as additional factors that need to be considered.

In addition to lifestyle risk, Turvey (2002) identifies *victim incident risk*. This term refers to what is happening at the time the offender and victim are in contact with each other, and includes the time of day of the occurrence, the victim's state of mind, if there was any drug or alcohol consumption by the victim, and where he or she was located. This information is important to the police officer dealing with a missing person report, not only in situations where a person may have been seen being abducted, but in situations where the only information available is where and when the missing person was last seen. In the absence of knowing what it is that has happened to the missing person, all behavioural and event information has the potential to be useful to the assessment of one's risk for foul play, suicide or likelihood of having run away.

### *Psychological Autopsy*

The term psychological autopsy was developed in the 1950s in Los Angeles when the Los Angeles Suicide Prevention Center and the Los

Angeles County Coroner's office joined forces to determine if unusual cases may have been suicide, homicide or accident (Edwards, n.d.), although it was not until the 1960s that psychological analysis was described in detail (Ebert, 1987). Psychological autopsy is defined as a technique that explores the psychosocial aspects of a victim's life. "It is an extension of victimology (i.e., knowledge about a victim) that reconstructs the deceased's psychological state leading up to and at the time death" (La Fon, 2002, p. 157).

It is a procedure that requires the collecting of information not just from the next of kin but, ideally, also from friends, co-workers, and acquaintances, medical reports and crime scene analysis (Ebert, 1987). Through these sources unique personality features and life stressors are documented, in addition to psychological states and major life events. Psychological autopsy can be used to either identify factors about a known suicide, or it may be used when the reason for one's death is not immediately apparent. In recent times determining whether a deceased person has died due to suicide, homicide, accident or natural causes has been of interest to insurance agencies whose policies may preclude payment if death is due to suicide (Ebert, 1987; La Fon, 2000).

Psychological autopsy, as a methodology for the present study, is expected to be a useful guide for the collection of relevant and valuable information about the three types of missing persons, and one which has the potential to highlight unique factors which are specific to runaways, foul play victims as well as those who suicide. Because major life stressors and psychological wellbeing are points of interest, persons who have run away, as well as those found to have suicided, are expected to be more readily identified as a consequence of the principles of psychological autopsy.

Research projects have identified a number of key areas that are considered risk factors for suicide. The results of a majority of the large community-based psychological autopsy studies (e.g., Fergusson, Woodward & Horwood, 2000; Harris & Barraclough, 1997; O'Donnell, Farmer, & Catalan, 1996; Vijayakumar & Rajkumar, 1999) have consistently found that more than 90% of adult suicides suffered from a major mental or emotional disorder. For example, Fawcett et al. (1990) found that being depressed, having no children under the age of 18 in the home, suffering from anxiety, an increase in alcohol consumption and experiencing a current episode of cycling affective illness (i.e., cycling between depression and hypomania or mania without intermittent recovery) are strong risk factors. Based on the consistency with which research has identified diagnosed mental health problems, Hendin (1994) has proposed the use of diagnosis-specific risk factors as a guide to risk estimation whereby the first consideration for risk of suicide is mental health. Supporting this approach is the finding that there are verbal and behavioural clues indicating intent to suicide in about 90% of psychological autopsies of suicidal deaths (Shneidman, 1994).

In the present research, the application of the principles of psychological autopsy to runaway cases is also expected to reveal important information because of the focus on one's history of mental health issues, stressful events and factors leading up to the going missing episode. Some of the qualities that separate runaways from the general population include the frequency of use of alcohol, cigarettes and other drugs (Greene, Ennett, & Ringwalt, 1997), conduct problems (Whitebeck, Hoyt, & Boa, 2000), and having a history of sexual abuse (Widom, 1995; Yoder, Whitbeck, & Hoyt, 2001). Hence, whether it be the presence or the absence of certain qualities

that are unique to a particular type of missing person, it is anticipated that the application of the principles and methods of psychological autopsy to closed missing persons cases thoroughly explored by police, will reveal important information.

#### Summary of Research Objectives

Statistically, this research relied on chi-square analyses and data mining procedures. Whilst the details of these analyses have been omitted, the information is available from the author. Ultimately, an effort was made to identify characteristics that differentiate those who have run away, suicided or fallen victim to foul play, as well as identifying qualities that are unique within each of these types of missing person, and some of the more significant findings have been presented below.

#### Data Source

The present research is part of a larger study funded by the Maurice Bryers Foundation and is in collaboration with the Missing Persons Unit of the New South Wales Police Service. The information used in this study was extracted from records held in a centralised database (COPS), as well as from photocopies of records and other relevant information stored within the Missing Persons Unit. Also included were relevant files archived within the Homicide Library of the NSW Police Service. A total of 357 case files were used in this research for which the descriptive statistics are reported in the results section.

All aspects of the information contained within the files were considered for their capacity to predict type of missing person. Determining what aspects of the data were suitable and obtainable required combing through the files a number of times. Content analysis of the cases initially yielded over 60 variables, some of which reflected characteristics such as circumstances surrounding the persons disappearance, details from witnesses or the content of runaway and suicide notes left. Excluding missing person status, 26 variables remained by the conclusion of the data collection process. The 26 variables are listed below.

Demographic Factors: This group of variables includes age, gender and ethnic group by appearance.

Social background factors: Social background factors reflect marital status, whether there are any dependents, residential circumstances, current occupation and geographical location of residence.

Circumstantial characteristics: included time of the day, day of the week, Season. Whether the person was last seen in public or private and who the reporting person is.

Personality and behavioural factors: This group of variables includes whether being missing is out of character for him or her, what the reporting person thinks or suspects has happened to the missing person, what risk factors for foul play are known to be present, whether the missing person was known to be rebellious or deviant in any way, and if the missing person has run away in the past.

Mental health factors: This group of variables include whether there is a known history of suicide attempt or talk of suicide, the presence of any apparent mental health issues, drug or alcohol issues, and distinguishes between the presence of long-term stressors and short-term stressors.

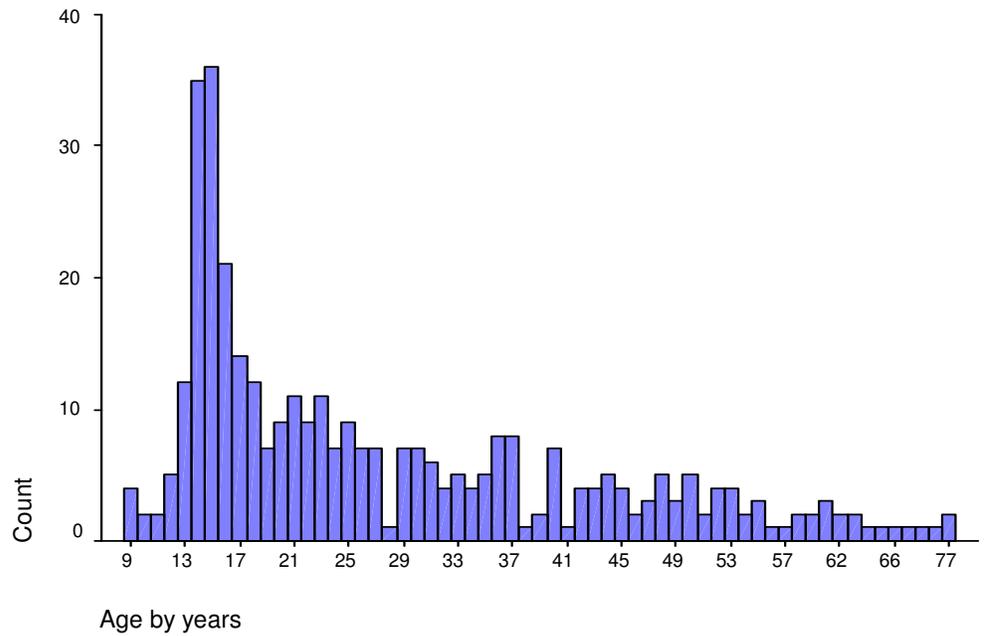
Event Details: The variables for this group include the method used to complete suicide, whether the perpetrator was known or a stranger to the victim of foul play, and the persons life or death status when he or she was located.

## Results

Due to space limitations, not all the results can be reported here. Therefore, only the more salient findings will be presented. Those interested in more detailed information can contact the author.

### Overview of entire missing persons sample

A total of 357 missing persons files were selected for inclusion in this research. The sample ranged in age from 9 years to 77 years with a mean age of 28 years ( $SD = 15$  years). Figure 1. displays the ages for the entire missing persons sample, which shows that more adolescents were reported missing than any other age group (mode = 15 years).



*Figure 1.* Frequency of age across entire missing persons sample

There were 184 females (51.5%) in the entire sample, compared to 173 (48.5%) males.

There were 250 (70%) runaways, 54 (15.1%) persons who attempted or completed suicide and 53 (14.8%) persons missing due to foul play.

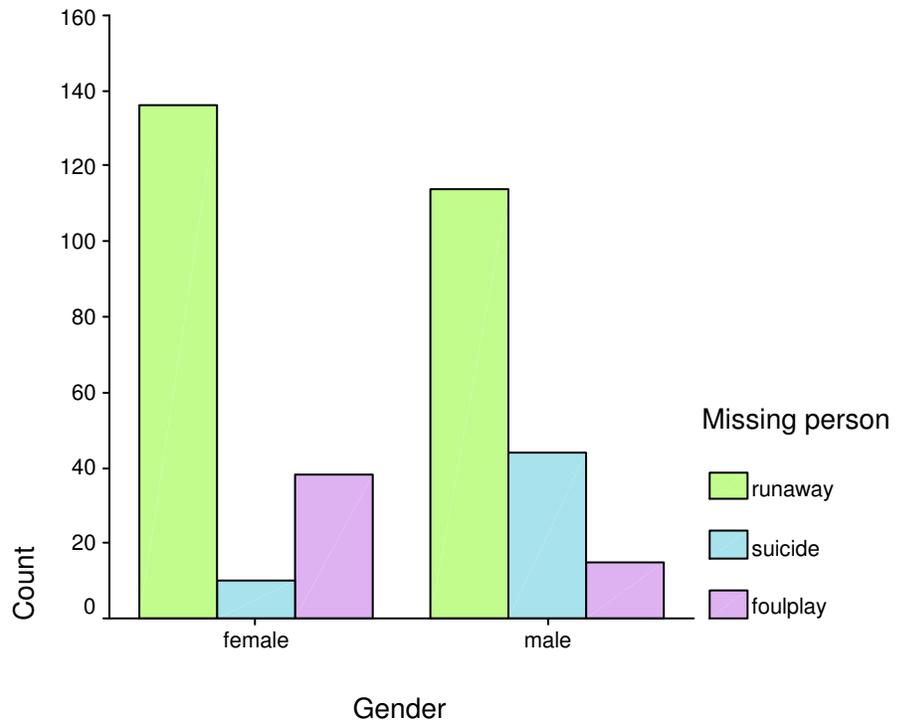
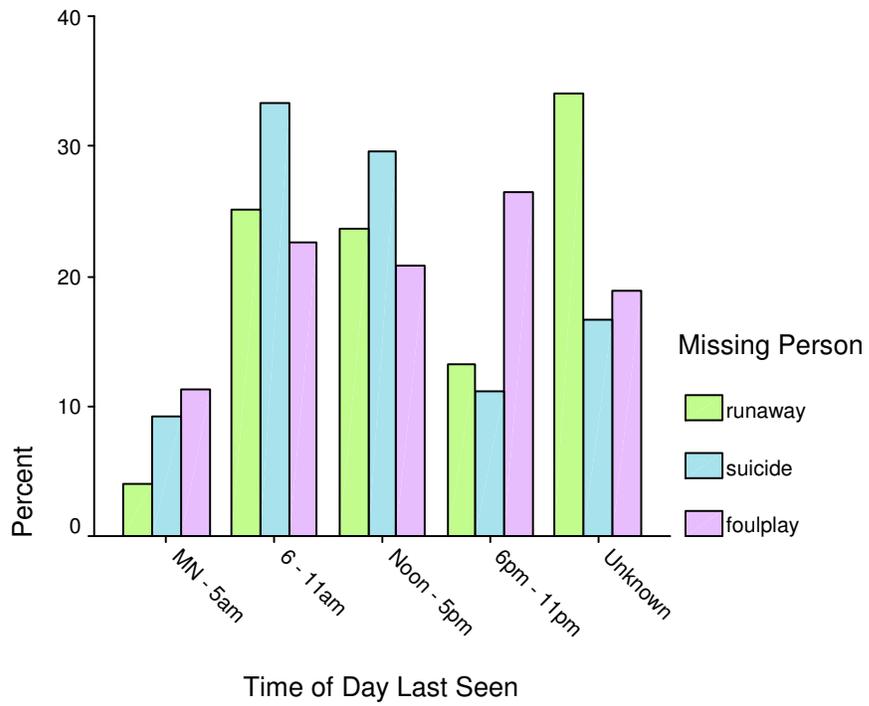
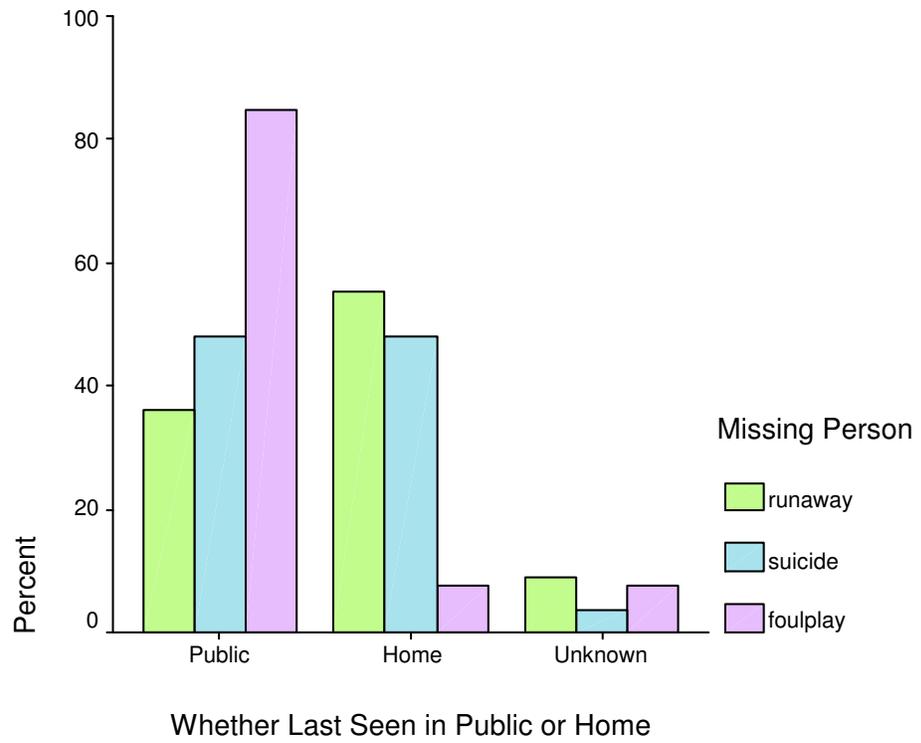


Figure 4. Gender according to missing person category

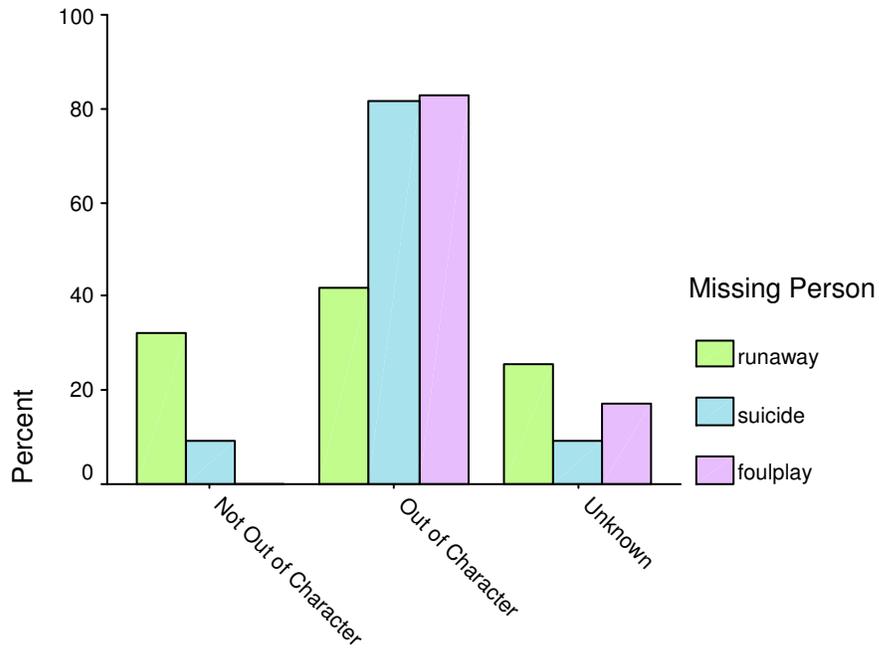


*Note.* MN = midnight

*Figure 8* Time of day when missing person was last seen according to missing person category

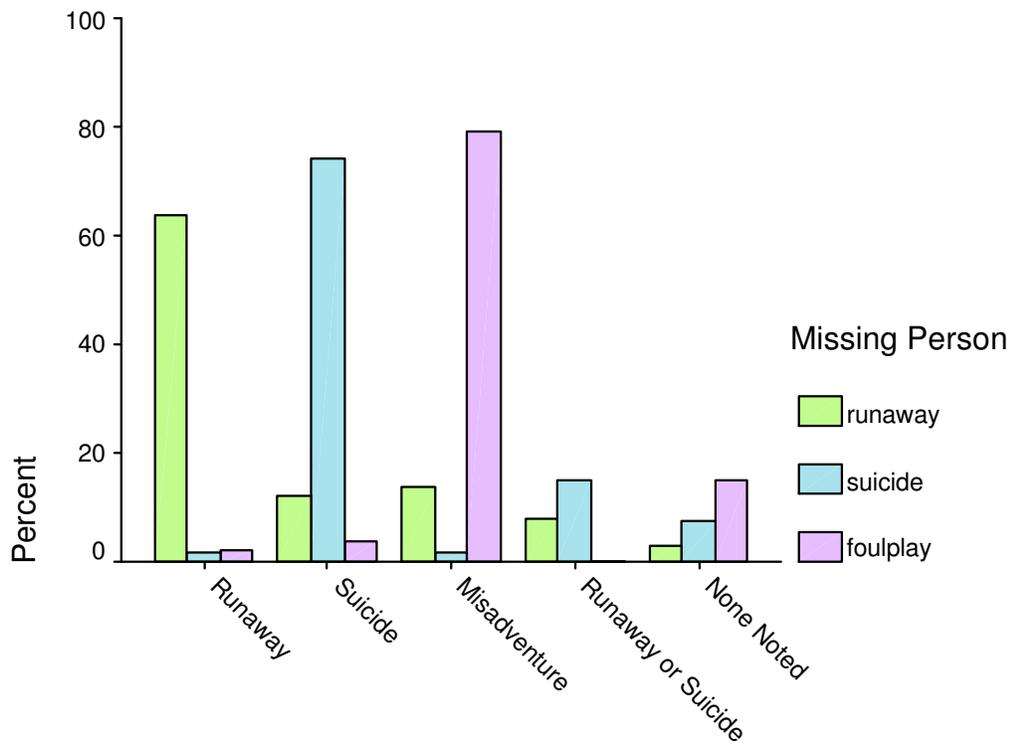


*Figure 21.* Whether missing person was last seen in public or at home according to missing person category



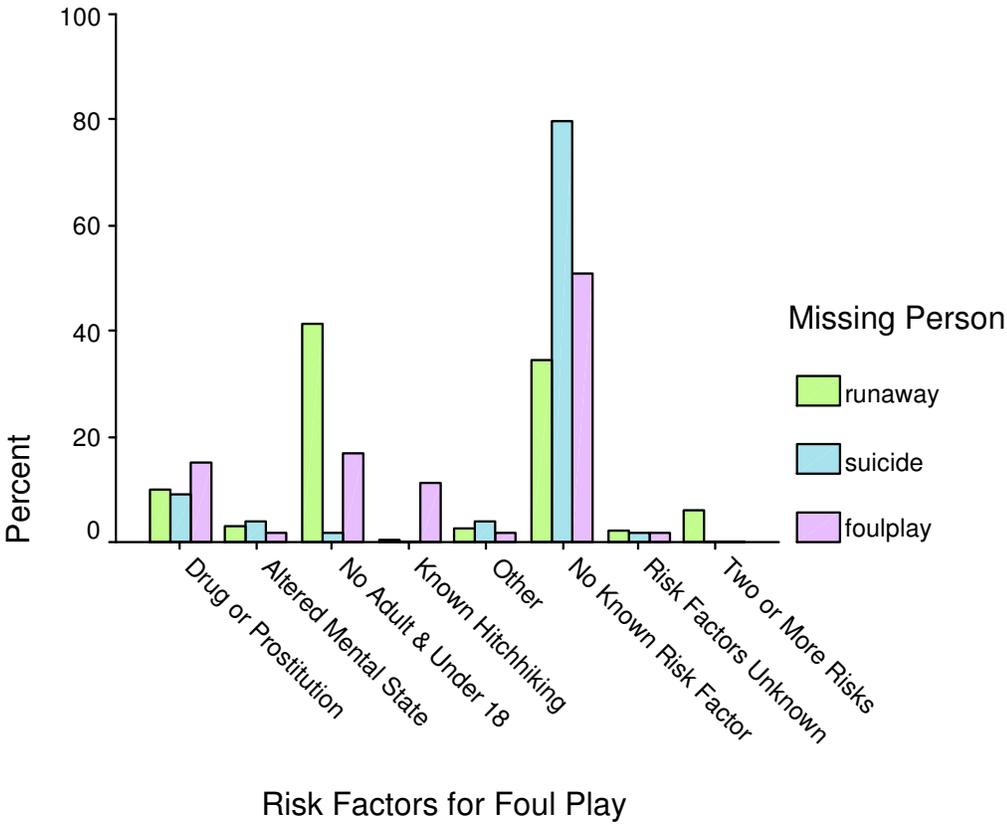
Whether Disappearance is Out of Character

Figure 13. Whether disappearance is considered to be out of character according to type of missing person.



Suspicious of Reporting Person

Figure 34. Suspicions of the reporting person according to missing person category



Note. "Drug or prostitution" = drugs or prostitution or crime; "No adult & under 18" = unsupervised and under 18 years at night or under 16 during the day; "Other" = persons last seen leaving with a stranger or persons who owed someone money; "Two or more risks" = persons who participated in at least two of the risk factors within this variable.

Figure 154. Risk factors for foul play according to missing person category

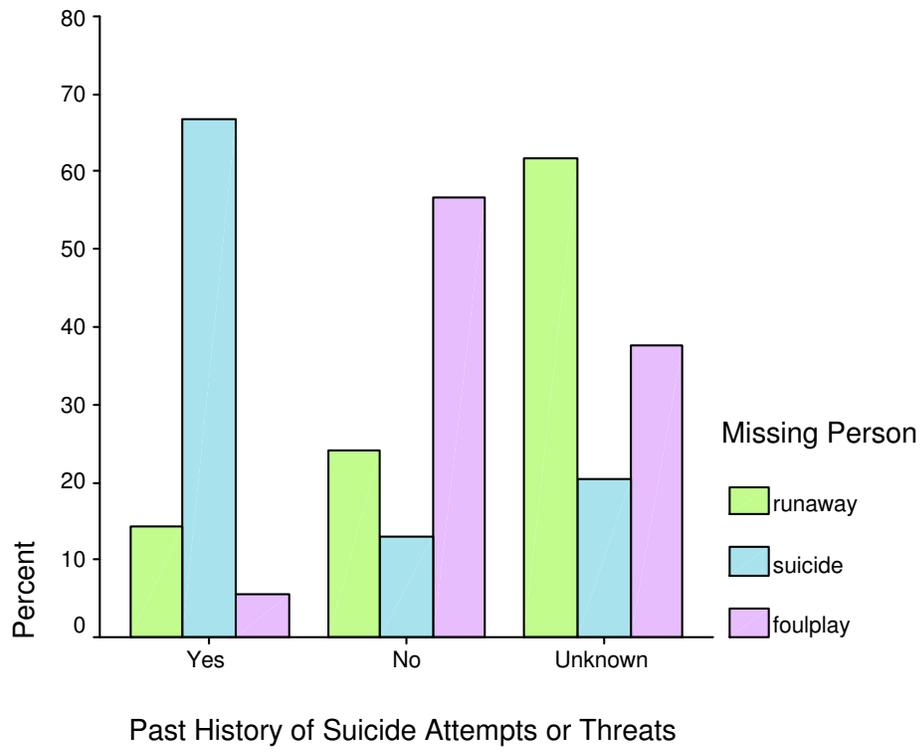


Figure 58. Past history of suicide attempts or threats.

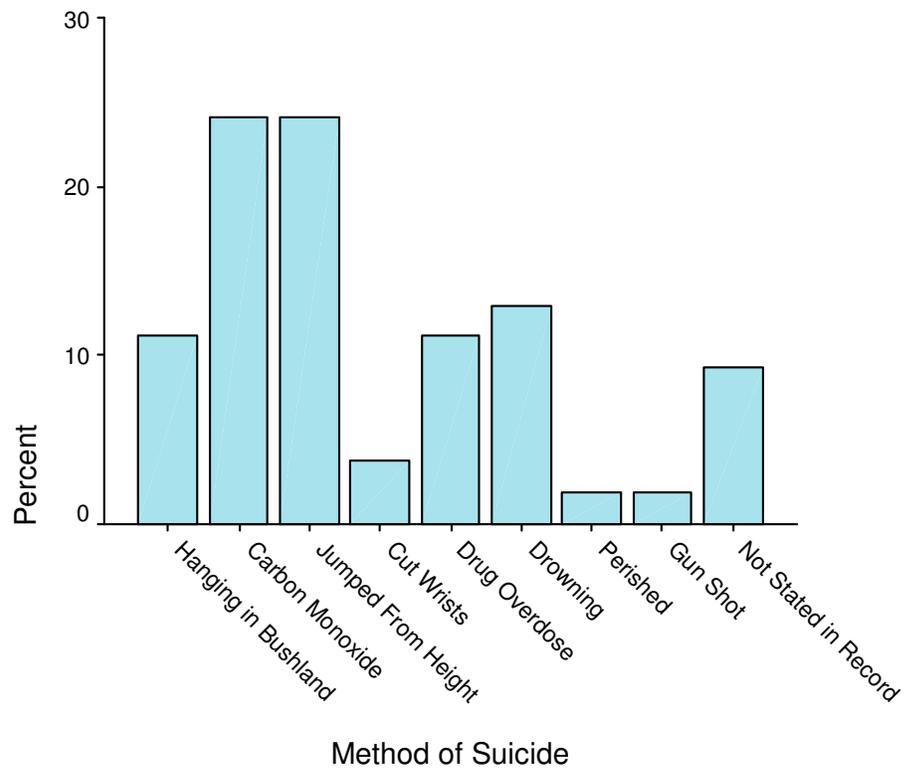


Figure 63. Method of suicide

Those who are missing with the intention to suicide, and those missing due to foul play, are regarded by the police as high priority. The implications associated with misclassifying suicide and foul play cases as runaways are very serious. Runaways are (typically) accorded lower priority (e.g., Newiss, 1999), so misclassifying these cases as suicide or foul play cases, whilst still a burden on police resources, is not life threatening to the person who is missing. While ideally no errors in classification should occur, misclassifying a person who has fallen victim to foul play as a runaway has a different and far more serious cost, than the misclassification of a runaway person as being the victim of foul play.

## Conclusion

Unlike the FBI approach to profiling, this research outlines an empirical approach that unambiguously links the features observed in the missing person's preceding behaviour and psychosocial wellbeing with those of his or her reasons for being missing. The present study offers a profile that is not based on speculation, inference or on a sample of convenience, but rather is based on a variety of different types of files which helps to improve the generalisability of these findings.

The results from the chi-square analyses performed in the present study provide the police with explicit themes that are common to the lives of the different types of missing person. The predominant behavioural style that a missing person exhibits adds weight to the notion that the three types of missing person can be profiled by virtue of the consistency of their behaviour. On its own this information has the potential to help police direct their questions towards areas that are relevant, informative and discriminating.

One of the key obstacles for police officers who must fulfil their duty to assess the likely risk factors involved, manage the investigation, and communicate about the missing person who may be at risk of foul play or suicide, is that no explicit professional standards exist in law enforcement practice and there have been few efforts internationally to develop or evaluate interventions to improve decision making in this area. There has been no substantial attempt to develop training programs in risk assessment or to evaluate how, or even whether, such training might improve officers assessments and judgments of risk (e.g., Newiss, 1999).

The present research offers policing personnel specific areas within the person's lifestyle, behaviour, and psychological wellbeing that previously have

not been fully realised both in regard to the relevance of certain characteristics as well as unique ways in which the groups differ. Additionally, the findings from this study support the argument that a peer can accurately judge the likely motives or goals of the person who is missing, and in so doing accurately advise the police of the possible risks that the missing person may be exposed to.