THE MISSING PERSON DIMENSION

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Whenever we hear of someone going missing, particularly children, we immediately fear the worst. Parents, who lose sight of their child in a shopping centre, even for only a few minutes, may jump to extreme conclusions and fear that the child has been abducted or met with violence. In some cases that fear is realised, as with kidnapped toddler, Jamie Bolger, who was abducted from a shopping mall in the United Kingdom in 1993. In our own country, children disappear and are sometimes never found. There would be few Australian adults who do not remember the three Beaumont children, who disappeared over 30 years ago from an Adelaide beach and of whom there is still no trace.

However contrary to the public perception people go missing for all sorts of reasons, and rarely under criminally related circumstances. Adults may go missing because of mental health reasons, or intending to suicide, they may have memory difficulties or conditions like Alzheimers, they may simply become lost, or forget to advise a change in plans to someone who is expecting them. Others may choose to go missing to escape abuse or other stressful circumstances, to avoid the consequences of some action, or to remove themselves from family conflict. Children and young people go missing for similar reasons. Many want to assert their independence, or are simply rebelling against perceived parental restrictions.

Regardless of the reason, children and young people who go missing are often vulnerable to crime impacts, locating them takes criminal justice resources and, as will be described later in this paper, create significant impacts on families and the wider community.

Incidence of missing children and young people

There are over 30,000 people reported missing in Australia each year. In fact, on average, every 18 minutes someone is reported missing to police. Over half are aged under 18 (55%). In 1997, 15,633 children and young persons were reported missing to Australian police services, comprising 8,157 females and 7,476 males (Henderson & Henderson, 1998). In fact, the actual number of children and young people going missing in a year will be even higher. This is due to the fact that there are no figures for those who go missing but are not reported to police. It is not known how many parents choose not to treat their children as 'missing', or who rely on other avenues like family networks or community groups to locate their missing children.

Analysis of police statistics over a three-year period shows that the rate at which people are reported missing to police has remained constant as shown in Table 1. However, there is a slight decline in the rate for children and young persons over this period. Children and young people are also reported missing to police at a much higher rate than adults.

Table 1:   Missing persons reported to police expressed as rate per 1,000 persons in the general population in that age category (Henderson & Henderson, 1998)

Incidence rates	1995	1996	1997
All missing persons	1.55	1.55	1.55
Adult males	1.12	1.13	1.14
Adult females	0.69	0.71	0.73
Male children and young persons*	3.18	3.11	3.15
Female children and young persons*	3.74	3.64	3.62

*aged under 18 in all jurisdictions except Victoria and Tasmania where figures relate to persons aged under 17

Fortunately most missing people do not stay missing. Over 99% of people reported missing to police are located, and over 85% within one week. Children are usually missing for shorter periods than adults. In a survey of missing people to be described later in this presentation, 78% of children and young people reported missing to Australian police in 1997 were located or returned in under 3 days, and 89% in under one week. Most had gone missing for all sorts of reasons other than criminally related ones and were located safe and well.

There has been a lack of Australian research on missing children, though some excellent information resources have been developed by practitioners in the field. Unfortunately these were not widely promulgated at the time of their publication nor have they been maintained to reflect current circumstances or available services.

The missing person study

In 1998, the National Missing Persons Unit (NMPU) commissioned an independent study of missing people in Australia in order to both address this information gap and to identify service delivery needs. The full study, "Missing People: Issues for the Australian Community", is available from the NMPU and its Internet site (www.missingpersons.info.au). This study is based on an analysis of Australian police statistics, a survey of families and friends of 270 people reported missing to police and consultations with over 90 organisations with an interest in missing person issues. It also assessed the economic and social impacts of missing people on the Australian community.

Characteristics of missing children and young people

To provide some context to the discussion of strategies to respond to missing children presented in the second half of this paper, a brief overview will be provided of what the study found to be the main characteristics of Australia's missing children. This is based largely on the survey in the study, of a randomly selected sample from the national population of people reported missing to police, and represented almost 2% of the approximately 15,000 people reported missing to Australian police over a 6 month period.

The average age of the children and young people in the survey who went missing was just under 14 years as shown in Table 2 although ages ranged from an infant to just under 18. Three-quarters (76%) were aged between 13 and 16. A higher percentage of boys reported missing were aged under 13 than girls.

Table 2:   Age distribution of male and female missing children based on survey results
              (Henderson & Henderson, 1998)

Age statistics	males	females
Average age (in years)	13.5	13.9
Age range	2 - 17	1 - 17
Percentage aged 13 - 16	70.2	81.2
Percentage aged under 13	23.4	11.0

Most of the missing children and young persons in the survey were Australian born (93%), or, if born overseas, from an English-speaking country (5%). Very few children from a non-English speaking background were reported missing to police. This may be either a reflection of a real difference between cultures or parents from non-English speaking communities choosing different networks or agencies other than police to help locate their missing children.

Most were school students (88%), although a small number were employed (3%), unemployed (6%), a college student (1%), or of pre-school age (2%). They predominantly lived in the metropolitan areas of Australia (76%) or in regional towns (16%), rather than rural areas (8%).

The majority of those missing were living in the parental home at the time they went missing (89%) or with another close relative (7%). It should be noted that this survey excluded people going missing from institutions such as supervised youth facilities, hospitals, or similar locations. In a separate analysis of all missing persons reported to Australian police over a one-week period in September 1996, almost 20% of people under 18 went missing from such a location (Henderson and Henderson, 1998).

In 38% of cases in the study survey, the family member interviewed stated that the missing person had some sort of special need. Most commonly, this was a medical condition of some kind (ranging from mild asthma to insulin-dependent diabetes) or a psychological condition (such as depression or extreme emotional disturbance over a parental breakup). Boys were almost twice as likely to have some special need identified by the family member than were girls (52% compared to 28%). This is a statistically significant difference (chi-square = 9.9, p<.01). Where a special need was identified, this was more commonly mental health or extreme emotional distress for girls and an 'other' need such as Attention Deficit Disorder for boys.

Table 3: Special needs of male and female missing children identified by survey respondents as a percentage of those reportedly having some special need (Henderson & Henderson, 1998)

Special need category	males	females
Physical health	32.5	28.6
Mental health or extreme emotional distress	17.5	35.7
Other*	50.0	35.7

* includes Attention Deficit Disorder, alcohol or drug abuse, intellectual disability, brain injury, aged under 2 years and so on

A surprisingly high number of children and young people reported missing had gone missing before, or went missing again. In the study survey, 38% of children and young people had gone missing at least once before, although these prior incidents were not necessarily reported to police. According to the survey respondent, 44% went missing again in the 18 to 24 months following this incident. Almost one-quarter of the group (24%) reportedly went missing both before and after this particular incident was reported to police. There was a tendency for more females to reportedly go missing again, but this was not a statistically significant effect (chi-square = 4.11, p=.25).

Table 4: Prior and subsequent missing person history as a percentage of those where both previous and subsequent history is known (Henderson & Henderson, 1998)

Prior and subsequent incidence*	males	females
Both previously and subsequently missing	21.9	27.7
Previously missing only	11.0	12.8
Subsequently missing only	17.8	25.5
Neither previously nor subsequently missing	49.3	34.0

* excludes 11 cases where prior and/or subsequent history information was either not available or not applicable (eg missing person did not return home when located)

Some children and young people's history showed a very high number of repeats. Over a third (38%) of those with a history of prior incidents (or 15% of the whole sample) had reportedly gone missing over 5 times before.

Circumstances under which children and young people went missing

Children and young people most commonly went missing from, or were last seen when reported missing to police, at home (60%) or at school or on the way to or from school (23%) as shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Location where missing from or last seen (Henderson & Henderson, 1998)

Location*	%
Own home	60.2
Friends or relative's home	5.8
School or travel to or from school	22.7
Work or travel to or from work	1.1
Commercial or entertainment area or similar public place	4.6
Park, beach, bushland or similar place	1.2
Nonspecific location, eg out with friends, walking, on holiday	4.6

* excludes 2 cases where information was not available

Friday tended to be the most common day of the week that children and young people went missing (24%) although the distribution across other days of the week was relatively flat (9 to 18%). Time of day, where specified, also varied but was most commonly during the morning and afternoon hours, as shown in Table 6.

Table 6: Time of day went missing or last seen (Henderson & Henderson, 1998)

Time of day*	%
Morning (between 6 and 11 am)	36.1
Afternoon (noon to 5 pm)	24.5
Evening (6 to 11 pm)	20.4
Nightime (midnight to 5 am)	0.7
Daytime (specific time not stated)	12.9
Nightime (specific time not stated)	5.4

* excludes 31 cases where information was not available

One in five children and young people (20%) went missing in the company of another person, most commonly, a friend or friends or a boyfriend or girlfriend, but sometimes with a sibling. The proportions were similar between the two sexes.

Circumstances under which missing children and young persons were located

Fortunately almost all children and young people who go missing are located, often within a short period of time. One third of those in the survey were located on the same day that they were reported to police, and another 30% were located on the next day. Overall, 89% of children and young people were located within one week of being reported to police. There was a slight tendency for girls to stay missing for longer periods than boys. Thirteen percent of females were still missing after one week compared to 9% of males, while 38% of boys were located on the same day they were reported compared to 30% of girls.

Table 7: Time between being reported to police and location (Henderson & Henderson, 1998)

Time	%	Cumulative %
same day	33.1	33.1
next day	30.3	63.4
2-3 days	14.6	78.0
4-7 days	10.7	88.7
8-30 days	7.3	96.0
31-60 days	2.2	98.2
60 days - 6 months	0.6	98.8
6 - 12 months	0.6	99.4
over 1 year	0.6	100.0

The greatest proportion of missing children and young people in the survey was located by their families (39%) as shown in Table 8. Another third returned home of their own accord or made contact with parents or relatives (32%). Only 18% were located through police action, and this included situations where the missing person was identified because of some other police activity not directly related to the missing person search, such as arrest for shoplifting. There were no sex differences in proportions returning home or making contact, although females were more likely to be located by family search endeavours than males (43 and 34% respectively).

Table 8: Method by which the missing person was located (Henderson & Henderson, 1998)

Method*	%
Located through family search action	39.0
Missing person returned home	20.3
Missing person made contact	11.9
Missing person returned to a location he/she was known eg school, work	4.5
Police located through missing person search action	11.3
Police located by other action eg arrest	6.2
Other	6.8

* excludes 1 case where information was not available

Most commonly, the place where the missing child or young person was located or had spent most of the time while missing was at someone's home, usually a friend's home. Proportions were similar for boys and girls (43 and 44% respectively).

Table 9: Where located or where most time was spent while missing (Henderson & Henderson, 1998)

Location*	%
someone's home	43.5
temporary accommodation eg refuges, caravan park	8.1
a public place eg the street, entertainment centres, etc	26.7
a non-specific location eg 'with friends'	21.7

* excludes 17 cases where information was not available

Reasons believed and explanations given for why children and young people went missing

The study survey asked respondents what they believed was the reason for the person going missing at the time he or she went missing, and what explanation was given when the missing person was located. These responses were content analysed and coded across both reasons and explanations.

Common categories included:

a)   safety concerns (such as fears of abduction, suicide, or accidental harm);

b)   asserting independence or rebellion against parental authority; and

c)   unintentional absences (for example, confusion about where and when the missing person should have arrived or getting lost). See Table 10.

For children and young people, the most common category believed to be the reason why the person went missing, and the most common explanation given when the missing person was located, related to *b) issues around asserting independence and rebellion against parental authority*.

Safety concerns were often predominant at the time the person went missing, but were rarely confirmed when located. Only two of the 178 cases had explanations coded as safety concerns. The first was the abduction of a child by her natural father. The second involved a 17 year old girl who told her parents when she returned home the next day that she had been abducted and driven around for 12 hours by a male after a New Years Eve party. In neither case, did the respondents identify that the missing child had been subject to harm.

Table 10:   Reason for going missing believed at the time and explanation given after location (Henderson & Henderson, 1998)

Reason believed or explanation given*	% reasons	% explanations
safety concerns	15.7	1.8
unintentional absence	3.3	13.3
rebellion/independence	27.5	30.8
escaping adverse consequences of own actions	11.8	11.2
emotional pressure/distress	2.6	2.1
peer pressure	5.2	6.3
for adventure/fun	3.9	4.2
other specific reason/explanation	8.9	18.9
nonspecific eg family argument	20.9	11.9

* excludes 24 cases of reasons and 36 cases of explanations where the respondent gave a 'don't know' response or information was not otherwise available

These categories were combined into three larger groups to provide sufficient numbers to analyse gender differences. The first was defined as 'inadvertent' (combining unintentional absences and safety concerns and any relevant cases from the 'other' categories above). As an illustration, one case involved a 13 year-old boy who decided to go off on a canoeing adventure in the bush with an older boy. He neglected 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. He simply forgot to keep anyone informed and was totally unaware of the impact on his family.

The second category was described as 'purposeful' and included all those categories where there was an apparent intention by those missing to deliberately go missing or absent themselves. An example is the case of a 15 year-old girl who, after being suspended from school and arguments with her parents, left home one night with a girlfriend, leaving a note for her parents to tell them she was leaving home. The two girls remained missing for 15 months. Both had apparently planned very effectively to disappear. They had organised to change their names with a legal service to avoid being traced through government records and then moved interstate. These girls were very deliberate and organised in their intentions, but because of their age and the fact that they had moved away from any support networks, there were concerns for their welfare.

The third category included those cases in the 'nonspecific' category that could not be readily coded as either 'inadvertent' or 'purposeful'. There were no significant differences between male and females in either reasons believed or explanations given across the three broad categories.

Table 11:   Gender analysis of categories of reason believed and explanation given (Henderson & Henderson, 1998)

Category*	% males	% females
inadvertent reason	22.9	25.0
purposeful reason	52.9	60.7
nonspecific reason	24.3	14.3
inadvertent explanation	14.3	13.9
purposeful explanation	60.3	69.6
nonspecific explanation	25.4	16.5

* excludes 24 cases of reasons and 36 cases of explanations where the respondent gave a 'don't know' response or information was not otherwise available

Impacts of children and young persons going missing

The full study of all missing persons assessed the economic cost of locating missing people and the associated immediate health and employment related costs at $2360 per person reported missing to police. The economic cost to the Australian community was estimated to be over $72 million each year. This did not take into account the long-term impact on families and friends of the missing person, or on missing people themselves. For example, including an estimate of the cost of lost lifetime earnings from missed education for missing people reported to police added another $19 million. Many other factors, particularly emotional suffering and relationship impacts, have profound but uncosted implications. For every Australian that went missing, an average of 12 other people were directly affected in some way.

A greater proportion of respondents in the survey reported health and work impacts where children and young people went missing than when adults went missing. See Table 12.

Table 12: Impacts identified by survey respondents (Henderson & Henderson, 1998)

Reported impacts*	% of missing children & young people	% of missing adults
health impact reported	44.9	21.7
involved medical consultation	27.5	16.3
involved counselling visits	28.7	12.1
work impact reported	52.2	41.3
involved days lost from work	30.3	19.6
emotional impact reported	98.9	98.9
quality of life impact reported	96.6	89.1
relationship impact reported	64.4	44.0
personal search costs exceed $100	15.2	18.7

The study survey also provided some information about impacts on the missing children and young people specifically. In 79% of cases, the survey respondent identified some kind of impact on the missing person. Where impacts were identified, these tended to be linked to relationship and emotional effects. Females were significantly more likely to be reported to experience an impact of some kind than boys (chi-square = 6.1, p<.05).

Table 13: Gender analysis of impacts on the missing person identified by the survey respondent (Henderson & Henderson, 1998)

Type of impact*	% males	% females
no impact	31.0	13.8
health impact	1.4	9.6
school or work impact	2.8	10.6
emotional impact	21.1	16.0
relationship impact	22.5	37.2
other impact	21.1	12.8

* excludes 13 cases where the respondent gave a 'don't know' response or information was not otherwise available; where more than one impact was identified, the response was coded under one area only, in the order of priority set out in the above table

Identified service delivery needs

The survey also asked respondents about their experiences with police, other tracing agencies or departments they had contacted to assist in locating the missing person, and support services used.

One of the most critical areas of need identified by many families was the need for support, particularly assistance and advice with searching, and emotional support and counselling. This paper will not be examining this latter area in any detail and those who are interested should refer to the main study for details.

Police were the main agency, and usually the only agency, families dealt with to locate the missing person. Survey respondents were asked about three separate stages of their interaction with police - at initial reporting, during the investigation and search for the missing person, and when advised about the outcome of the investigation.

Generally, families expressed satisfaction with police at each stage. A small number stated they were neither satisfied or dissatisfied.

Table 14:   Expressed satisfaction with police (Henderson & Henderson, 1998)

Stage	%
At initial reporting stage	77.5
During the investigation/search stage*	68.9
When advised of outcome of the investigation/search**	72.9

*excludes 17 cases where information was not available or not relevant eg missing person located almost immediately after reporting so that there was no discrete police investigation/search stage

**relates to less than one-third of cases as the missing person was often located directly by families or returned without police involvement

Families were asked to identify what aspects they found particularly helpful and what areas could be improved for each of the three stages of police action that were relevant to their circumstances. In about half of relevant cases at each stage, people either did not volunteer specific comments or made only general statements about satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Where a specific issue was raised, responses were content analysed and coded according to the categories that emerged.

Percentages below relate to the number of respondents giving a response that falls within the particular category. Multiple responses were coded in each of the relevant categories, so that total percentages are greater than 100%. Issues for improvement were identified both by people who reported they were satisfied with police and those who stated they were not satisfied.

The officer's attitude was most commonly cited as particularly helpful at the reporting stage. A sympathetic and sensitive approach by police can help alleviate some of the distress experienced by families at this point in time and is often remembered very positively long after the incident. Delays in taking action were most commonly cited as the area for improvement at this stage. A number of respondents stated they believed, or were told, that police would take no action until 24 hours after the person was reported. It should be noted that this advice is contrary to each jurisdictions' Standard Operating Procedures for missing person investigations which indicate that a report should be taken and acted upon immediately.

Table 15:   Aspects identified as particularly helpful and which could be improved at initial reporting stage (Henderson & Henderson, 1998)

Area found helpful or which could be improved*	% helpful	% improve
General police action taken/not taken	48.0	29.1
Efficient police response taken/not taken	6.8	2.5
Timely action taken/delay in acting	16.6	45.6
Feedback and information provided/not provided	10.8	2.5
Contact maintained/not maintained with family	15.6	3.8
Attitude of officer(s) and interpersonal approach	50.0	26.6
Other	4.9	17.7

*excludes 76 cases where no comments were made or where respondents gave a 'don't know' response on areas found particularly helpful and 99 cases no comments were made or where respondents gave a 'don't know' response on areas that could be improved

Maintaining contact and providing feedback on progress was most commonly cited as particularly helpful and also as an area for improvement at the investigation stage. A simple phone call by police can do much to reassure families that something is happening or that someone is taking an interest, and can often make a huge difference to the distress and feelings of helplessness experienced by many families. See Table 16.

Table 16:   Aspects identified as particularly helpful and which could be improved at investigation stage (Henderson & Henderson, 1998)

Area found helpful or which could be improved*	% helpful	% improve
General police action taken/not taken	32.9	35.9
Efficient police response taken/not taken	6.4	7.6
Timely action taken/delay in acting	5.3	5.7
Feedback and information provided/not provided	13.1	20.7
Contact maintained/not maintained with family	47.3	35.9
Attitude of officer(s) and interpersonal approach	17.1	11.4
Other	5.3	15.1

*excludes 102 cases where no comments were made or where respondents gave a 'don't know' response on areas found particularly helpful and 125 cases no comments were made or where respondents gave a 'don't know' response on areas that could be improved, or where this stage was not relevant to the case

To summarise, families of missing children and young people experience immense emotional distress and impacts on their health, work, and relationships. They often report an overwhelming need for support and assistance in both helping to locate their missing child and for support in dealing with the experience.

Strategies to address identified needs

The first section of this presentation described the characteristics of Australian missing children and the impacts on the Australian community. The second section of the presentation will discuss a number of strategies adopted and areas where further attention is needed. These encompass police action, community responses, and government policy issues.

As the study showed the majority of children and young people went missing under circumstances that are not crime related, but it is important to treat each incident as if it could be a crime situation for a number of reasons. Firstly, overseas experience confirms that the initial hours are critical when a child goes missing. A United States analysis of child abduction murders (Gregoire, 1997) concluded that the vast majority of these children are murdered within three hours of abduction. Immediate reporting by parents and immediate action by police is critical in such cases.

Secondly, children going missing voluntarily expose themselves to circumstances where they are vulnerable to being preyed upon by others. For example, in one missing person case, a 13-year-old girl climbed out of her bedroom window after a family dispute. Police appropriately assessed it at the time as being a non-suspicious case. However she has never been found and it was not until information was gained from a suspect for another crime that her case was reassessed. While this case is now being investigated as a possible homicide, it has proved difficult to recreate her movements after this gap in time.

This situation is not unique to children who go missing the first time. In another case, a young teenage boy had a history of running away. He would habitually go missing only to either return home of his own accord or be located and returned home by police. On the fifteenth occasion of his running away, when both police and family were expecting a replay of the usual events, the situation turned out differently. On this occasion, the boy was found murdered.

In these instances, the missing children did not disappear because they were abducted, but they became susceptible to violence while they were missing. The vulnerability of missing children heightens the longer they are missing. Simply because there are no immediate safety concerns, this does not mean that a child will not be exposed to danger or harm as a consequence of going missing.

In fact, the nationally accepted police definition of a missing person extends beyond safety concerns, and includes concerns for the *welfare* of the missing person. 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" (Police Consultative Group on Missing Persons, 1999).

Thirdly, families fear their missing child has been harmed or abducted and often experience profound distress and trauma, regardless of whether their fears are ultimately realised. At this point, they warrant the support and assistance directed to other 'secondary' victims of crime. For example, a police response that assures them that appropriate and immediate action is being taken does much to mitigate the impacts already identified earlier in this presentation.

The importance of immediate police action is recognised by Australian police and is being further addressed by the Police Consultative Group on Missing Persons, an advisory group to the National Missing Persons Unit, comprising representatives from every Australian state and territory police service.

National minimum reporting and investigative standards recently developed by the Police Consultative Group reinforce the dual importance of police action to locate the missing person as expeditiously as possible in order to identify and investigate suspicious circumstances *and* also to minimise the trauma to the person and the family.

These standards also recognise the need to *immediately* assess the circumstances, appropriately deploy resources, and to continue to keep the family informed throughout the investigation. As stated earlier, two of the main concerns identified by families in the survey were delays in police taking action and failure to keep in contact to provide feedback about progress.

While police are obviously the main agency to which the community turns for the location of missing people, other organisations and families themselves also play a role. For example, community agencies such as the Salvation Army, Australian Red Cross, Link-Up, and International Social Service, have a missing person tracing function, although their services are not predominantly targeted to locating missing children in Australia. These agencies are involved in the strategic coordination of missing persons services nationally through participation in the second NMPU advisory group, the National Advisory Committee on Missing Persons,

Other agencies do not have a direct missing person tracing function but hold information critical to locating people. In the past, privacy legislation has been interpreted narrowly and government departments have been reluctant to provide assistance to police, other tracing agencies or the family on the grounds of confidentiality. In recent times, some departments have established mechanisms that, while not releasing information directly about the missing person to a third party, use their information bases to facilitate contact.

Unfortunately, some of the most critical information sources remain closed to agencies locating missing persons. For example, current address details provided when seeking health services are not released to police unless there is evidence that the missing person is dead. Such information is invaluable in resolving many missing person cases. For example, a pregnant teenager reported missing to police could not be located for months. Current address information provided at any of her numerous visits to doctor and eventually hospital would have easily located her, and resolved the distress experienced both by her family and the missing girl herself. The National Advisory Committee is pursuing the issue of access to government information on missing persons.

There are also other agencies that, through their own functions, and with greater awareness of missing children issues, can contribute significantly to locating children, reconciling them with their families, alleviating the distress experienced by families, and working to prevent the cases occurring in the first place. For example, Kids Help Line is a national agency that reaches thousands of children each week providing a 24-hour, anonymous and confidential, counselling service. Over the past year Kids Help Line has become a key partner in national efforts to address missing children issues.

In many cases families of missing children are viewed, and perceive themselves, as passive recipients of agency action. They are often unaware they can play an active and useful role in search endeavours or are unsure of how to do so. Waiting and not knowing what happened, was commonly identified as the single most difficult part of the whole experience by families in the missing person survey. The need for practical advice and information to assist families in searching was one of the issues most commonly identified by these families.

A useful strategy is to establish mechanisms and provide resources that empower as well as support families in their search efforts, in collaboration with police and other tracing agency action. For example, the National Missing Persons Unit, together with other agencies and families of missing people, is developing a Resource Kit called Search Options and Support (SOS), a guide to assist families of missing people. The SOS guide will be launched during National Missing Persons Week, the first week of August 1999 and will be available from police Missing Persons Units and the NMPU after that time.

Prevention

This paper has described the impacts and consequences of children going missing. Obviously, the goal is to prevent incidents occurring in the first place. Given the diversity of reasons for, and circumstances under which children go missing, there is clearly no single solution. Further research is also needed to determine whether prevention strategies can be targeted towards any particular group more at risk than any other.

A large number of children go missing on more than one occasion, and it is also important to develop particular strategies that focus on preventing recurrence among this group. Effective prevention strategies need to be tailored to the specific characteristics of the person, circumstances under which they may go missing, and the particular reasons prompting their disappearance.

Earlier in this paper three broad categories of reasons why children go missing - crime-related, inadvertent, and purposeful were described. Education and awareness raising about the consequences of going missing and of the alternatives available are particularly relevant to the 'purposeful' category . For example, counselling and crisis advisory services, where they are well informed about missing children's issues and needs, offer an avenue for young people to explore alternative ways of dealing with family conflict or difficulties. Other initiatives like those addressing homeless young people provide a potential avenue that has not yet been adequately explored in relation to missing children.

Supporting families to enhance their parenting capacity, particularly in developing effective communication strategies with their children, may be one of the most important areas in reducing the incidence among those children who go missing repeatedly. Such communication strategies may also assist in those cases of children going missing 'inadvertently'. Simple communication as to their plans, and clear expectations expressed by parents about being informed of changes or delay that could be interpreted as 'disappearing' could resolve many of those inadvertent incidents.

Promotional campaigns like National Missing Persons Week, coordinated by the National Missing Persons Unit (NMPU), provide the opportunity to promote preventative messages to both parents and children. The NMPU and other related internet sites are constantly updated and also provide relevant prevention messages. Regular evaluation and review, supported by further research is required to ensure the effectiveness of such advice.

Missing children as offenders

Missing children have been discussed in the context of children as victims at this conference. The existence of a potential link to tomorrow's conference theme of children as offenders also should be acknowledged. Children who choose to go missing, may find themselves in circumstances where they are homeless and without funds or in peer groups where they are pressured to participate in illegal activities.

For example, McCarthy and Hogan's (1991) analysis of homeless youth in Canada found that a significantly greater proportion of homeless young people committed offences such as drug use, drug trafficking, property theft, assault, and prostitution after leaving home and the authors attributed this to their current homeless situation. Children who go missing can drift into homelessness and criminality. While there is no specific data on this subject in the Australian context, it is another issue to consider within the missing person dimension.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there is a clear need to reduce the number of children going missing. They go missing for many reasons, but rarely as a result of criminal intent. There are health, school, emotional, relationship or other impacts on some missing children, but more commonly, the most profound effects are on others. Impacts on families and friends can be devastating and may continue even beyond the time the child is located. There are also economic and social impacts on the wider communities. The frustration facing police, tracing organisations and families is that most of these missing children incidents are preventable.

With greater appreciation of the reality of the missing person dimension, rather than the perpetuation of commonly-held false myths, appropriate community and government support and action can be developed to reduce the numbers of missing children and young people reported to police. Families are the 'secondary victims' when a child goes missing. It is important that some attention is devoted to their needs so that the impacts on the family unit can at least be softened if not eradicated.

While it is not a crime to go missing, many families are currently suffering through the lack of support for their needs. Actions are being taken but more is necessary if we are to reduce or preferably to avoid, the traumas and costs associated with missing children. This is an area that needs to be addressed by us all - families, friends, government departments, non-government organisations, researchers, policy makers, practitioners, media, and by missing people themselves. We need to take responsibility as a community for addressing this missing person dimension.

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