Can a multi-agency redesign of the response to reports of missing young persons prevent repeat demand? A scoping review of the evidence.

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Executive Summary

Missing persons incidents feature widely in demand for police services across the UK and consume considerable police time. In particular, each year there are many thousands of incidents involving young people who are in some form of care. These young people are especially vulnerable as they already often have some disrupted family background and are at considerable risk when they go missing. This report summarises the findings of a scoping study into missing incidents involving young people who are in care. The study is sponsored by the Open Societal Challenges initiative in the Open University and Hertfordshire Constabulary. One aim of the work is to help identify what actions Hertfordshire Constabulary can take to reduce demand without compromising the support provided to young, vulnerable people.

The study searched both the grey and academic literature to establish the evidence base for good practice in dealing with this issue. The key findings are:

- Young people who go missing often have underlying reasons for doing so that highlight problems they are facing and indicate vulnerability.
- Care home locations are often "hotspots" for missing incidents with a few locations often responsible for a high proportion of all missing young persons incidents.
- Once a young person has gone missing and has been returned to care they are likely to repeat the missing behaviour, often many times. Although practices such as "return home interviews" are often conducted to establish the reasons, the repeats indicate that these factors have not or cannot be fully addressed.
- There are many calls for multi-agency or coordinated working both during and after missing incidents but there appears to be little follow-up evidence of solutions being trialled. The literature strongly indicates a relative lack of combined action.
- Some police activities, such as grading of risk during missing incidents, are inconsistently completed. The initiative to categorise young people as "absent" rather than "missing" is not always regarded as effective.
- Police forces often struggle to take a longer-term view of missing young persons incidents, seeing the person as potentially "undeserving" rather than as vulnerable. This also compromises an effective response.

Introduction

In a typical year there are over a quarter of a million missing persons incidents reported to the police in the UK (Reilly et al., 2021). This means that in England and Wales alone there may be nearly 400,000 calls into police control centres reporting people either missing or absent. When these calls are investigated it results in 405 missing persons needing to be located, on average, each day. Most missing reports are in relation to children under the age of 18, accounting for 56% of reports in 2020/2021 in England and Wales. The problem is made worse in that people are often reported missing on more than one occasion, with children in care averaging at 5.5 missing episodes once a pattern of going missing is established.

Figure 1 An example of the annual missing persons statistics for UK and Northern Ireland
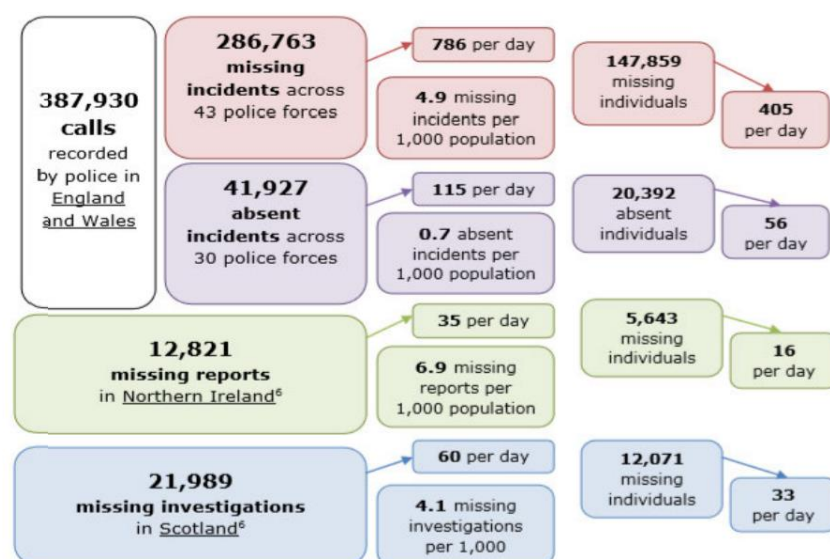
Source: Reilly et al. 2021

There is an evidence base that children who have previously gone missing are at risk of Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) and Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE). Any missing persons report presents police with a difficult set of decisions about how much to escalate a response to the incident. Most children return of their own accord, rather than being found through police activity and 47% return within 8 hours, with a further 40% returning within 48 hours (NCA, 2017). Police sometimes therefore respond to incidents that will end safely within hours and at other times risk not responding to a missing person who is in greater danger.

The resource implications of this demand are significant. The estimated cost of a missing person incident to policing was estimated in 2013 to about £2415 (Shalev-Green and Pakes, 2013), double the cost of a robbery incident (at £1010 per incident) and quadruple the cost of a burglary incident (at £530) (Heeks et al., 2018). In the context that police services often have 30% more demand than they have the capacity to provide a response, the demand from missing persons has wider implications. We should also factor in that most of the missing people are vulnerable and should be a priority for police to protect. Any actions to reduce demand by reducing the number of people going missing has the dual effect of reducing the demand capacity imbalance in policing and providing a societal benefit in protecting vulnerable people.

This problem does not only concern police forces. Other public services, including social services and education services, have resourcing issues associated with missing young people. The problem should be viewed as a multi-agency issue where coordinated work across services would benefit all.

This report summarises the findings of the first phase of an Open Societal Challenge research programme that has an underlying theme of how to achieve a sustainable reduction in demand for public services, largely focusing on multi-agency work that includes police demand. The work outlined here is the outcome of a scoping study into the literature concerning our understanding of the problems and good practice solutions concerning the demand created by missing young persons. Our academic perspective is that demand for public services can often be sustainably reduced, i.e., the demand measured by the number of incidents and the resources needed to serve those incidents can be lowered without compromising the quality and effectiveness of the service provided to the public. This can be achieved in two main ways:

1. Demand can often be prevented from happening at all by looking at the underlying reasons why demand occurs in the first place and solving the root causes of the demand occurrences. Often these solutions are very different to the standard responses provided by public services.
2. Demand can be reduced by removing "failure demand". Failure demand can be defined as *"demand caused by a failure to do something or do something right for the customer"* (Seddon, 2003). This demand can be something as simple as wasted effort caused by a poorly designed process. In the case of repeat incidents of people going missing most could be characterised as failure demand. If someone has already gone missing once, why weren't steps introduced to stop this from happening again? It is also possible that a poor response to earlier police incidents, such as reports of anti-social behaviour, may result in escalation of childrens' behaviour towards missing incidents.

Hence the focus of the work conducted in this study concerns broadly the prevention of demand and the improvement of processes and multi-agency working in a way that eliminates failure demand.

The first phase scoping review is complete and the research team will move onto a phase of in-depth analysis of missing persons incidents from the Hertfordshire Constabulary to establish where improvements to the service can be made.

Research questions

The research questions we are asking over the course of this work are as follows:

1 What action can prevent children, who are at most risk, from going missing?

Aim: to understand why children in care go missing and to prevent demand on public services.

Objectives:

- To identify patterns of behaviours and characteristics of missing episodes for children in care.
- To identify the current multi-agency arrangements in relation to measures taken to manage the risk of going missing presented by children in care.
- To identify any further activities that can reduce this risk.

2 What activities can agencies undertake when a child goes missing that are most likely to ensure the return of a child to a safe environment?

Aim: to ensure missing children are located as quickly as possible.

Objectives:
- To identify patterns of behaviours and characteristics of children while missing.
- To identify the current multi-agency arrangements and activities undertaken during a missing episode and to conduct a value analysis of those activities.
- To identify potential improvements to existing processes.

3 What follow up activities to a missing episode in a child is most likely to prevent repeat missing episodes from occurring?

Aim: to protect children from the long-term harms of going missing and prevent repeat demand on public agencies.

Objectives:
- To identify patterns of behaviours of children who repeatedly go missing.
- To identify the current multi-agency arrangements and activities undertaken after a missing episode and to conduct a value analysis of those activities.
- To identify any potential improvements to existing processes.

Literature Review Methodology

Recent academic literature on missing young persons is possibly quite limited in scope but there is the possibility of other grey literature from both a practitioner base and other interested parties, such as children's charities. Hence, our methodology takes the form of a scoping study (Arksey and O'Malley, 2005). This method of analysis was selected over more traditional systematic literature reviews, as it permits cumulative identification and evaluation of the literature. This type of study has a broader research question than that usually researched with a systematic review and is used to identify gaps within academic literature and inform current debate and future research. Specifically, we review the existing literature on missing young people to explore the extent to which it contributes to an understanding of current practice and to identify the good practices employed.

The Arksey and O'Malley five stage methodological framework was employed to structure this review. This approach allowed a credible and reflexive examination of a variety of literature. The framework supports methodological rigour and transparency, enabling future replication and validation of reported results.

Stage 1 – Research questions
1. We have articulated the research questions in our introduction.

Stage 2 - Relevant literature
Keywords were developed and agreed by the authors to search the literature, including electronic databases and reference lists as well as grey literature taken from relevant organisations' websites. The key search terms used were:

- Missing children
- Missing persons
- Abscond
- Runaway
- Care home
- Residential care
- Looked after
- Police

These terms were used in combination starting with "missing children" or "missing persons" and then refining down with other key words.

Eleven databases (ABI Inform, Business Source Complete, Scopus, Social Care Online, OVID, Emerald Insight, Ingenta Connect Complete, Criminal Justice Abstracts, Google Scholar and Ebsco Host) were selected for our search as literature was likely to be published in management and sector specific journals and websites. Google Scholar was selected because it offered a wider search that could include grey literature.

Stage 3 - Study selection

Prior to our search inclusion and exclusion criteria were developed and agreed (see Table 1) by the authors. Search results were collated, and titles screened one of the authors and duplicates removed. Papers were then screened by abstract, and any irrelevant articles removed. Full papers were then read by authors and some additional papers included through citation tracking. An additional search was conducted using 'Google' to identify any public sector specific reports on the care system in relation to missing children and police sources such as the College of Policing.

Table 1 Inclusion and Exclusion criteria

| Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Papers written in English	Papers not written in English
Published between 2008 and 2023	Published before 2008
Practices and perspectives on missing persons	Contexts involving slavery, one child policies and international trafficking
International studies	
Full papers, books, chapters, reports	Conference posters, Newspaper articles and other forms of media
Qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods, literature reviews, government documents, reports	

Stage 4 – Charting the data

A data charting template was used to collate the key information about each paper included in the review. This includes information about author(s), study aims, theoretical concepts/frameworks, study location, study design and summary information about key findings and implications in relation to the use of practices for quantifying, preventing, locating and managing missing persons incidents.

Stage 5 - Summarising and reporting the results

The initial search of the databases identified 61 publications (see Figure 3) with an additional 21 found via citation tracking and a search of the grey literature. Duplicates were removed (5) and a further 6 publications were removed after reading the full text. Seventy-one papers and reports were included in the review. The PRISMA diagram (see Figure 3) summarises the search process and number of papers included in the review (Moher et al. 2009).

Figure 2 PRISMA flow diagram of retrieval and selection of publications
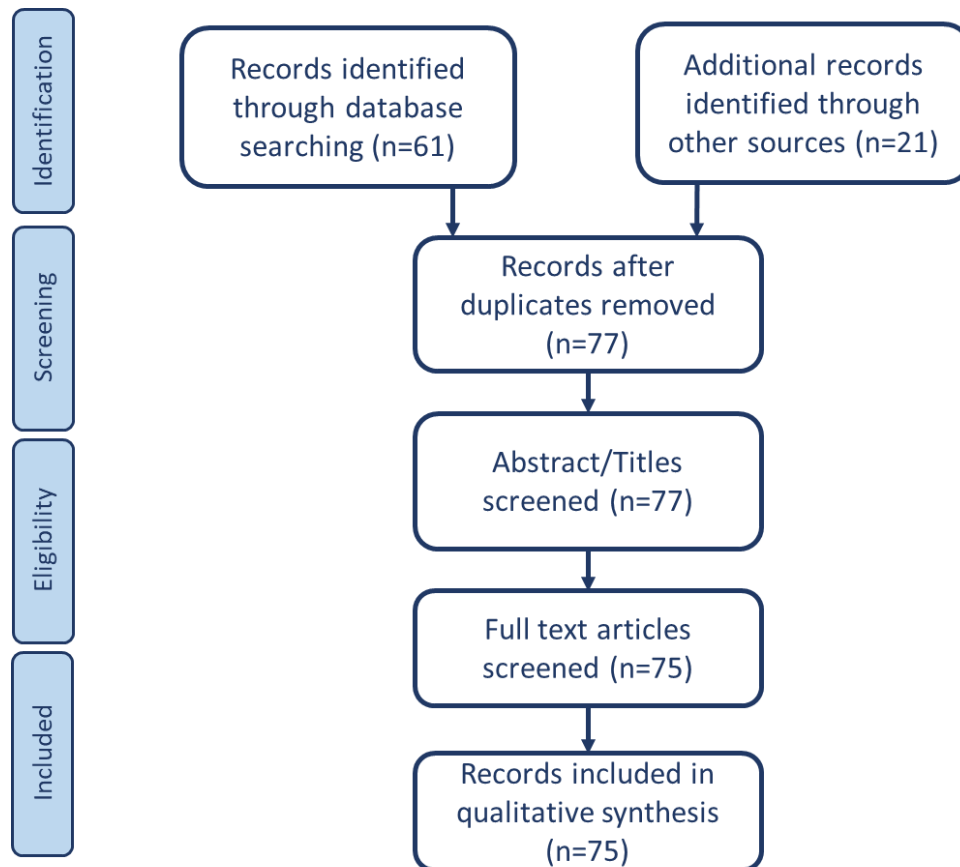
Once the data extraction sheets had been collated and screened the papers were assessed for repeated themes. The list below shows the themes and the number of papers categorised within that theme. Some papers were categorised more than once in different themes. Three papers were on topics outside of or beyond these themes and stood out as taking some ideas further.

Table 2 A summary of the themes in papers and frequency of categorisation

Theme	No. of papers
Patterns of disappearance/statistical analysis of misper data	10
Profiles/studies of those that go missing	6
Vulnerability of those who go missing	8
Risk assessment	7
Police/other attitudes to missing persons	4
Repeat missing persons: causes, implications and response	11
Searching activity, especially media actions	10
Prevention/improvement attempts	6
Performance of the care system	4

The following section summarises the findings from each of these themes.

Scoping Review Key Themes

In this section we consider in turn each of the themes identified in our review of the papers and reports that were found. We have sequenced them based around our initial framework, not by the level of evidence uncovered.

Patterns of disappearance

The role of missing persons, especially missing young people, featured widely in general studies of demand in policing. The College of Policing (2015) estimates of demand had set the context that demand levels in policing need to be addressed. Fleming and Grabosky (2009) describe the supposed "insatiable appetite" for calls for police services, leading to perceptions amongst forces of a demand and capacity imbalance, with forces having to turn away some demand (Elliot-Davies et al, 2016). Boulton et al. (2017) provide an in-depth study of demand within Lancashire, quantifying the types of incidents that consume police resources from over 63,000 records. They found that welfare incidents were nearly 19% of all demand. Additionally, when the locations of incidents were identified, schools and children's homes featured widely in the locations of demand. 40% of the incidents at young people's service addresses were welfare-related, indicating young absent or missing persons were a significant feature. In particular, two children's homes in the area accounted for 76% of all welfare incidents in this category.

The demand problem is not confined to the UK. Whereas the UK system has been more researched over time than other countries, partly due to a series of care scandals in the UK, countries such as Ireland and Hungary have high levels of missing or runaway children. The US is seen as one of the better developed systems for tracing children who run away (Rush, 2015)

Shalev-Greene and Hayden (2014) provide a detailed analysis of the locations where children go missing using data from one police force, using the COMPACT database. They looked at addresses where three or more cases occurred within one year. Private care homes were responsible for 57% of locations, with almost all of those missing being aged 18 years or under. From 2011 data one private care home was responsible for 93 missing persons reports.

The theme of repeat disappearances occurs in most of the statistical analyses. Repeat events will be covered in more depth in a later section. However, there is clear evidence that repeat missing events whether by location or by individual represents a highly significant part of the workload. Babuta and Sidebottom (2018) conducted a study of 2,577 missing persons cases (2011-2013 data), including those from 680 children. Of those under the age of 18, 42% appeared in the data set more than once. The particular at-risk group were those aged 13 to 17. Using a simple statistical comparison, they found that the number of repeated disappearances was far higher than random chance. Within the sample, without any underlying cause of repeat disappearances they would have expected less than one case of 10 or more disappearances by the same person. They found 35 such cases. In the sample the children were usually missing between one and three days and those located were usually found close to the point of their disappearance.

One of the most recent studies of missing children (Woolnough and Cunningham, 2021) provides descriptive statistics about the age profiles of missing children, showing how adolescent children are far more likely to go missing. However, when the incidents are classed as either intentional (e.g., "ran off") or unintentional acts (e.g., unaware of the time) then younger children were more likely to be unintentionally missing. Older children were more likely to be missing for longer and had usually travelled further during their missing episode.

Profiles of those that go missing

A number of research studies have conducted interview with those who go missing to uncover the underlying reasons for incidents. Hill (2014) points out that going missing because they have run away from home are indicating something may be wrong in the home environment, including being subject to abuse and neglect. An Ofsted report (Ofsted, 2012) took the views of 98 children in large focus groups to address many of these questions. They produced a list of reasons for going missing including:

- Anger
- Stress
- Pressure
- Being unhappy with being in care
- Fear of people living in the same placement
- Being extremely annoyed about something
- Finding a placement too strange
- Changes in the people in charge of where you live
- Not liking your placement
- Running away to escape police
- Feeling you don't get what you want or need in your placement
- Feeling you need a new start somewhere else
- To try to calm down if you are very stressed
- Not being listened to
- Not getting your own way
- Being scared
- To get people to notice you because you're 'not being seen or heard'
- To get away from bullies
- Not liking people you are living with
- Being affected by your own family issues
- Curfews
- To get away from staff you don't get on with
- Rules
- Problems at school
- Not being allowed to see certain members of your family
- Not being allowed to go home from care
- Relationships in your placement breaking down
- To avoid going into a children's home
- Not settling in a new place
- To escape from violence
- Because you can't cope
- Arguments and conflict
- Because you want to stay out
- Running to somewhere you feel safe
- Loneliness
- To test foster carers to see if they really care
- Being anxious about the consequences of your own behaviour

The report suggests that most of those running away intend to return. They include quotes from children such as:

- *'it's to make a point, but you mean to come back'*
- *'it's to calm down'*
- *'might just need a break'.*

They also highlight that those returning often feel awkward about going back.

The motivations of people going missing was neatly categorised in a recent study in Spain (García-Barceló et al.,2020). Although the study looked at both adults and children, it is useful in its approach to understanding motivation. They studied four types of theme:

Intentional escape
This included having family problems, avoiding family responsibilities and previous arguments.

Intentional dysfunction
This category included having emotional problems, actions concerning suicidal thoughts and drugs or alcohol issues.

Unintentional accident/drift
Those missing because they suffered a health incident, missed medication or were busy and did not return somewhere.

Forced/criminal
People were categorised here if they were a victim of crime, were separated from a partner, meeting an ex-partner etc.

Figure 3 shows their categorisation in terms of the influence of third parties and willingness to go missing.

Figure 3 Categorisation of underlying reasons for going missing.
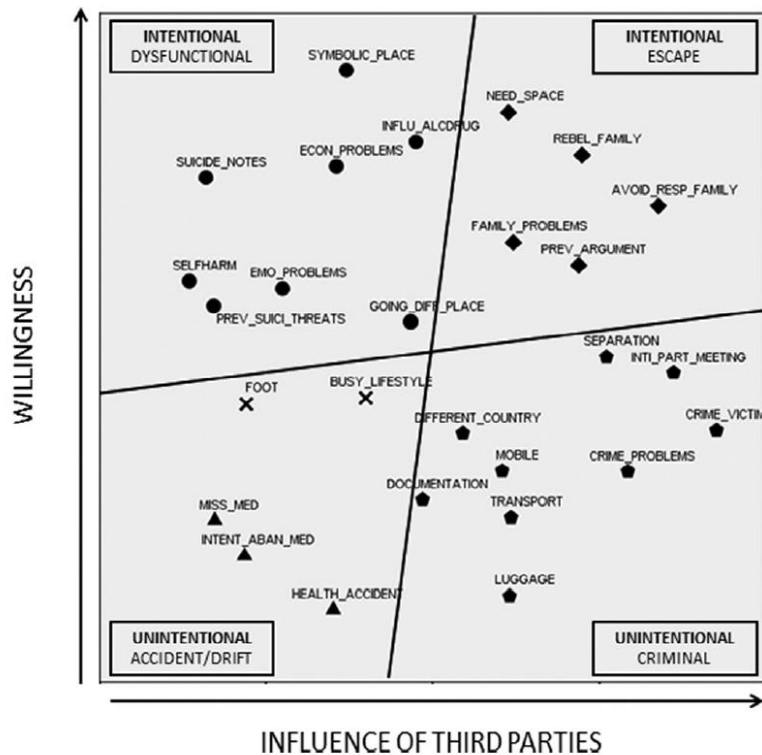
Source: García-Barceló et al.(2020)

In addition to the research covered in the earlier section of the report, a number of papers have discussed the underlying characteristics of those going missing. However, these have usually been studies of adults or adults and children combined. Ferguson (2021) studies 916 cases in Australia of those missing from hospitals and mental health facilities, identifying these were different in profile from others. This could be used as a good predictor of location for this type of person.

Bowden and Lambie (2015) conducted a literature review focusing on why children go missing from care homes in Australia. They found that children who entered the care system during adolescence had a higher rate of absconding than those who did not.

Performance of the care system

There have been several reports published by both government and charity groups that look at the structure, governance and successfulness of placements for children in care. Data from 31st March 2022, shows the number of children looked after (CLA) by local authorities in England rose to 82,170, up 2% on last year, continuing the rise seen in recent years. This is a rate of 70 CLA per 10,000 children (APPG 2019). This increase in demand is placing strain on the care system as it currently exists. The All Party Parliamentary Group in 2012 reported in its conclusion that every year the government spends £2.8bn on children in care, approximately £1bn was spent on 5,000 children in children's homes. The average cost per child was £200,000 and some private care homes charge £250,000 to care for children with complex needs (APPG 2012). When linked to the fact that the biggest non-crime problem for police is missing persons, with children making up a large proportion of missing person reports (Babuta and Sidebottom 2018), there are benefits to all parties therefore, to seek solutions to this problem.

Whilst there are several care settings that a child can be placed in, this research focuses on care homes. Residential care homes defined by the Care Standards Act 2000 as premises which are wholly or mainly for the provision of care and the accommodation of children (defined as those under the age of 18). They must register with Ofsted, unless they are subject to an exemption and comply with the regulations and quality standards set by them.

There are also settings which do not meet the above definition because they are geared towards supporting independent living of children aged 16-18 years of age rather than fulltime care. These are termed "unregulated settings" and do not have to register with Ofsted and comply with their regulations (Education Journal 2021). Because they are unregulated, there is little oversight and reliable data from these settings. Police often do not know they exist in their area until they receive a call to report a child missing (APPG 2019). Over a 10-year period 2010-2020 the number of children living in unregulated accommodation increased by 89% from 3,430 to 6,480 which has raised concerns about these settings, naimely that they are being inappropriately used to place under 16 year olds because of insufficient regulated care home provision (Educational Journal 2021).

Local Authorities in England however, have a duty to ensure "so far as is reasonably practicable" that there is sufficient accommodation within their area to meet the needs relating to placing children in care, known as a sufficiency duty (Ofsted 2022). If a local authority does not have suitable accommodation within their area, or it is in the best interest of the child, the child can be placed "out of area", which means in another local authority's jurisdiction. In 2011/12, 46% of children placed in children's homes, secure children's homes and supported accommodation were out of area. In 2017/2018 this rose to 59% (APPG 2019). The All Party Parliamentary Group published reports in 2012, 2016 and 2019 all of which highlight concerns relating to the increased practice of placing children looked after in "out of care" children's homes and in her foreword to the 2019 report, Anne Coffey, Chair of the APPG for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults said "Urgent action is now needed, and the Government must take responsibility and come up with an Emergency Action Plan to slash the numbers of out of area placements, recognising that they do not keep children safe. The plan must ensure that there are sufficient places for children to live locally." (APPG 2019). This could be seen as an area where performance of the system is sub-optimal.

In addition to this, many local authorities cite that placement of children is being driven by market forces in many cases rather than the best interests of the child, with local authorities contracting out to care providers who are setting up homes in locations across England where property is cheaper and not where the demand is. Being placed out of area is frequently cited as being a contributing factor to going missing as young people want to see their friends and family and feel isolated in their new surroundings (APPG 2019).

The over-reporting of children in care as missing is discussed by Hayden and Goodship (2013) and Hutchings et al.(2019), which is an issue across England and Wales. The National Missing Persons Framework for Scotland was published in May 2017. It sets out two national aims which are 1) to prevent people from going missing in the first place and 2) to limit the harm associated with people going missing (McIver & Welch 2018). In 2015-2016 in Scotland a pilot was conducted whereby the views of young people and professionals involved in the care and safeguarding of those young people were evaluated. McIver and Welch (2018) found that young people there are often reported missing when in fact they have chosen to stay out later than planned and are often at no risk. The children do not consider themselves as missing and by care home staff reporting them missing to police it can lead to them being stigmatised for behaviour that is typical amongst children living at home. This is therefore a familiar phenomenon amongst care homes.

There is an inspection process for care homes, which is the responsibility of Ofsted. They are not obligated to liaise with police about the reports made to police by care homes, which is an area of interest to us. Following an inspection of 10 local authority areas and viewing 105 missing children's cases from them and conversations with the children, carers, professionals and partner agencies, in 2013 Ofsted published a report that highlighted several key areas for improvement within the care home system.

- Data quality and reliability were difficult to assess due to vast differences between local authority and police statistics
- Where multi-agency cooperation, timely and persistent family support, continuity of workers and listening to the views of children had taken place the repeat missing incidents reduced, but this was not consistent the board
- Multi-agency working at strategic level was not as well developed as at operational level
- Poor recording of children's views meant they were not able to be used to inform service planning
- Managers did not effectively check staff were complying with procedures and staff awareness of procedures was varied
- Records that police carried out safe and well checks were not always in the case files
- There was limited evidence of effective return home interviews, which meant professionals were unable to learn more about the reasons and risks of missing episodes
- Risk management plans were scarce, those that existed were vague or out of date
- Placement instability was a factor in at least 1/3 of 30 cases that they tracked
- Cross boundary or out of area placement procedures were not routinely followed, information sharing was of variable quality
- Reports about looked after children where not routinely provided to corporate parenting boards in all local authorities
- Mainly in schools, the inspectors found some good preventive work, but the in general the focus on prevention was varied (Ofsted 2013)

Vulnerability of those going missing

There are three distinct stages of a missing person episode where vulnerabilities have been considered in the literature. Those present before the child goes missing, those they are exposed to whilst missing and those they are likely to experience in the future as a result of events whilst missing.

Boulton et al. (2023) analysed 113 return home interviews over a 3-month period from 1 police force and compiled the following two tables outlining key vulnerabilities identified prior to going missing and whilst missing.

Table 3 Child history and vulnerabilities present prior to this missing episode.

	Yes	No	Unknown
Known to Children's Services	82 (73%)	7 (6%)	24 (21%)
Has an active key worker	61 (54%)	2 (2%)	50 (44%)
Engaged in crime	46 (41%)	-	67 (59%)
Conflict at home	40 (35%)	12 (11%)	61 (54%)
Behavioural problems	36 (32%)	3 (3%)	74 (66%)
Used drugs	36 (32%)	3 (3%)	74 (66%)
Has mental health issues	23 (20%)	3 (3%)	87 (77%)
Association with older peers	19 (17%)	1 (1%)	93 (82%)
Drank alcohol	11 (10%)	5 (4%)	97 (86%)
Subject to a Child in Need Plan	10 (9%)	12 (11%)	91 (81%)
Been a victim of a crime	9 (8%)	1 (1%)	103 (91%)
Has a disability	9 (8%)	6 (5%)	98 (87%)
Arrested, charged or prosecuted	9 (8%)	1 (1%)	103 (91%)
Subject to a Child Protection Plan	8 (7%)	12 (11%)	93 (82%)
Has learning difficulties	5 (4%)	6 (5%)	102 (90%)
Previous neglect	4 (3.5%)	-	109 (97%)
Been homeless	3 (3%)	-	110 (97%)
Has physical health issues	3 (3%)	5 (4%)	105 (93%)

Table 4. Harm experienced whilst missing.

	Yes	No	Unknown
Engaged with police	41 (36%)	21 (19%)	51 (45%)
Engaged in crime	25 (22%)	29 (26%)	59 (52%)
Drug use	21 (19%)	39 (35%)	53 (47%)
Alcohol use	16 (14%)	43 (38%)	54 (48%)
Victimisation	6 (5%)	44 (39%)	62 (55%)

Source: Boulton et al. (2023)

Hill et al. (2014) produced a report based on the NSPCCs Missing Children's Service and return home interview findings. Whilst its focus was on children reported missing from home, rather than looked after children it found from the return home interviews conducted between 2010 and 2011 there were 111 children identified as having vulnerability factors. There are strong overlaps with the list produced by Ofsted (2013) discussed earlier in this report. These factors, listed in order of frequency were:

- Significant parental difficulties in managing behaviour
- Issues at school
- Emotional and mental health
- Significant family stressors
- Physical violence inside or outside the home
- Known use of alcohol or drugs
- Inappropriate sexual relationships
- Criminal activity
- Learning needs

They also note they suspect substance misuse and sexual relationships were significantly underreported in the figures they presented.

Plas (2016) cites Cohen and Felson (1979) in relation to routine activity theory, which suggests there are three elements that need to be present for a successful victimisation; a motivated offender, an appropriate victim and the absence of a guardian. Plass (2016) applied the theory to that of missing children and their exposure to secondary victimisation concluding that whilst they are missing, children have an absent guardian therefore increasing their likelihood of victimisation, namely sexual assault, physical assault involving a weapon and robbery.

Stevenson and Thomas (2018) conducted a randomised study of 215 people who represented 10% of the eligible sample in Australia ten years after they were first reported missing in 2005. In this study they found 1 in 4 children had a mental health related vulnerability and the odds of being a repeat missing child were 2.61 times higher for youth with mental health vulnerability. Their recommendations to target interventions at mental health improvement to reduce the number of repeat missing episodes and to support police in their risk assessment decision-making and response.

Data analysis from Australian missing person records found that there are two groups who are particularly vulnerable to adverse outcomes 1) middle aged men with mental illness or suicidal intent and 2) females aged 13-17 who were more likely to have a mental illness or suicidal ideation (Bricknell 2017). Babuta and Sidebottom (2018) referenced earlier in this report also found 13–17-year-olds were a particular at-risk age group. The Children's Society commissioned a report based on results from a national survey questionnaire completed by 7,439 people aged between 14 – 16 years of age in the UK. It reported higher lifetime running away rates among females than males and higher than average rates of running away amongst young people who defined themselves as disabled and young people who have learning difficulties (Rees 2011).

Staines (2017) authored a response to a review of residential care written by Narey in 2016 which suggested the link between children in care and offending behaviour was weak and more closely correlated with early adverse experiences prior to being placed in care. Staines argues that the relationship is more complex than Narey accepts and adverse experiences during and after being placed in care and the criminalisation whilst in care are likely to lead to increased involvement in criminal proceedings. The intersectionality of gender, race and age also need to be considered as factors contributing to vulnerability.

Hilder et al. (2021) found a correlation between the number of adverse childhood experiences the top 81 prolific young (under 26 years of age) offenders in London during 2019 had experienced prior to becoming offenders themselves. Interestingly, whilst not defined as an adverse childhood experience in and of itself, 63% of the 81 prolific young offenders had been reported missing to police at least once. In a similar vein, Prescott-Mayling (2022) conducted secondary data analysis to establish whether machine learning could be used by police to predict future offenders of knife crime offences. Analysing crime records where individuals were recorded as either suspect or victim, their arrest and missing person records, Prescott-Mayling found the volume of missing person reports attributed to an individual indicated other vulnerabilities such as being exploited.

The Missing Children's Hotline was introduced to Ireland in 2012. Missing children made 75% of all Irish missing reports (Rush 2015). He concluded that, whilst the number of children in residential care in Ireland in 2014 was low at around 450 (due to around 92% of children in formal care being

placed in stable foster care settings), it was this smaller number from which runaway children are actively targeted by sexual predators and criminal gangs. This is true in the UK also (APPG 2019).

Finally, Stevenson and Thomas (2018) found from their more longitudinal study, that children who became repeat missing children were more likely to experience negative outcomes such as drug and alcohol dependency, self-harm and suicide in later life.

The link between vulnerability and going missing has been made clear.

Repeat missing persons

A report from HMICFRS (2016) looked at all 43 police forces in England and Wales and their response to missing and absent children. They found that the definition of "repeat missing" varied across forces with some quantifying three times or more in a 90-day period, where others defined it as simply more than once. Some forces did not have a definition, and this was a concern as the trigger for multi-agency intervention is often the repeat factor. Several authors have commented on the frequency that children, particularly those living in care homes are reported as missing. Babuta & Sidebottom (2018) found that in 1 UK police force between January 2011 and May 2013, nearly two thirds (64%) of all missing children reports were repeats and 15% of that group accounted for over half of the missing person reports. The likelihood of a child going missing repeatedly is associated with factors of age, being in care, history of family conflict and if going missing was considered out of character for the child. The average time a child was missing was 2.54 days with 77% returning the same or the following day. Interestingly, their study found that repeat missing children were found closer to the place they were reported missing from than children who were reported missing only once.

Difficulties with establishing the definition of repeat is not unique to the UK. An inaccurate classification of a missing person can have huge implications for the way the investigation to locate them is conducted. In Canada for example, they go one step further to define missing people as "repeat" or "habitual/chronic" Ferguson and Picknell (2022). Whilst this separate category should signify different categories of risk and potential responses and could be seen as a positive approach to managing demand, they found that often the terms were used interchangeably and the distinctions between terms was not explicit.

Looking for patterns of repeat missing episodes, Sidebottom et al. (2020) carried out data analysis from one UK police force and found that 75% of missing reports of children were repeats, with only 4% of the group being responsible for 28% of reported incidents. They also found that over half of the repeat missing reports were made within four weeks of the first, indicating that any preventive action needs to be swift to avoid further missing episodes. Similarly, Bezeczky and Wilkins (2022), Galiano López et al. (2021) and Tansil (2021) also found a small number of children were the subject of most missing episodes.

Tansil (2021) developed a binary logistic regression model which predicted which children in their study would most likely go missing repeatedly accurately in over 75% of cases. Hutchings et al. (2019) used logistic regression to identify significant risk factors that could distinguish a missing child as high risk of repeat missing incidents. They were looked after children, substance use, suspected sexual exploitation, known to Youth Offending Services and a history of abuse or neglect.

The impact of global events, namely Covid-19 and the UK lockdown restrictions on patterns of missing episodes was studied by O'Brien et al. (2022). They found that across the 6 police forces

analysed, lockdown did not reduce the volume of missing children reports made by care homes, although they were generally missing for shorter periods of time. This leads to the opinion that root causes of children in care going missing were of greater influence than a global pandemic to the children involved.

Rush (2015) reviewed the Irish position and found that children in care who were repeatedly reported missing were in the 16–17-year-old category and were testing the waters, especially those subject to curfew and generally turned up safe and well, mirroring the UK position.

Whilst many articles have established that a small percentage of children are repeatedly reported missing, looking for any commonalities, Shalev Greene and Hayden (2014) also looked at the locations from which they are reported and found that in one police force in 2011 private care homes were responsible for making 57.1% of missing person reports to police, followed by home addresses, mental health units and hospitals. 149 different addresses reported people missing three or more times in that year with one private care home making 93 reports alone. They make strong recommendations that in order to reduce the number of repeat calls the high demand locations are focused on by Ofsted and police to understand the drivers of that repeat demand and how to reduce it, whilst safeguarding the children in care. Huey et al. (2020) found similar in their Canadian study.

Shalev-Greene & Pakes (2013) estimate that the time taken to complete the automatically generated tasks from COMPACT for a medium risk missing person investigation is 18 hours. The additional work generated by repeat missing children investigations, considered medium risk due to their age, therefore is significant.

Police attitudes

One of the issues surfaced by the review is the general attitude towards young people that go missing. Unlike many aspects of police work, where there may be a clear delineation between "victim" and "offender", where there are ideas about good or ideal victims (Charman 2020), the status or position of someone who as deliberately gone missing is somewhat uncertain. Do they possess the "deservingness" (Charman, 2019) of a victim? Malloch and Burgess (2011) traced some of the historical attitudes towards missing children, citing Newiss (1999), who reported that police did not consider runaways as really vulnerable, with a view of young people as really troublesome. Garcia-Barcelo et al. (2020) cites Payne (1995) where missing children were categorised in five ways: "runaways," "pushaways," "throwaways," "fallaways", and "takeaways". This casual use of terminology does hint at dismissive attitudes towards missing young people at the time.

Hayden and Shalev-Green (2018) suggest the increasing expectations for police to deal with missing persons cases challenges police perceptions of their own role, moving from that of protector of the public or crime-fighter more towards social worker. HMICFRS-commissioned research (HMICFRS, 2016) on child experiences of police contact provided evidence of some negative attitudes towards missing children. This in turn influences the police response to a missing incident. The change towards re-categorisation of some missing children as "absent", brought in in 2010, has added some complexity. Some forces don't use the definition of "absent", grading all children as missing. Whilst this identifies an attitude that any missing child may be vulnerable, it has led to variability in how missing incidents are dealt with.   In the context of many repeat offenders, the demand takes away resources from core work. Collie (2019) therefore debates the role of other agencies in dealing with missing young people. In particular, the case of lost children in commercial spaces could be managed by private providers rather than the police.

Risk assessment

The College of Policing's approved professional practice 2016 defines four categories of risk for missing persons investigations. The table below outlines them. The level of police activity increases in correlation with the level of risk.

Table 5 Source: College of Policing guidelines for missing persons risk assessment

Risk level	Explanation
1. No apparent risk	There is no risk or harm either to the subject or public. Actions to locate the subject and/or gather information should be agreed with the informant.
2. Low risk	The risk of harm to the subject or public is assessed as minimal. Proportionate enquiries should be carried out to ensure the individual has come to no harm.
3. Medium risk	The risk of harm to the subject or public is assessed as likely but not serious. This requires an active and measured response to trace the missing person.
4. High risk	The risk of serious harm to the subject or public is assessed as very likely. This category almost always requires the immediate deployment of police resources.

The ability to accurately and confidently assess risk when it comes to missing children is difficult for a variety of reasons. Hayden and Goodship (2015) found that the ability to effectively assess risk for children reported missing was often hampered when reports were made to police outside office hours when access of other agency information was not available. The also found that police and social workers did not always share the same definition of risk, with police focusing on physical harm in the immediate future and social workers more concerned about longer term safeguarding.

The College of Policing APP (2016) recommends that the most appropriate means of assessing the risk posed to an individual is professional 'clinical' judgement. Tansil (2021), argues however that statistical forecasting is more accurate than professional judgement for making predictions about harms and individuals although it does have weaknesses. Other authors have conducted research on the topic of risk assesssments, Vo (2015) reviewed risk assessments for 5,984 missing person cases in one UK police force and found that whilst 16% of cases were graded high risk and 68% graded medium risk, 99% of those reported missing did not suffer any harm whilst they were missing, leading him to also question the effectiveness of current risk definitions and approach to risk assessment, implying police are overly risk averse.

Smith and Shalev Greene (2015) researched the attitudes of police supervisors in three UK police forces in relation to their responsibility to perform the risk assessment. They found half of the respondents in their study had not read the national guidance and half had also not read their own force policy. A third of supervisors in the study felt that training was insufficient. Most stated they had an awareness of the definitions, but not full understanding which infers that these first line supervisors are using experiential knowledge rather than relying on training. They conclude that anything less than formal training in how to effectively assess risk would be inappropriate and that training should be provided for every officer promoted into a supervisory role.

The Association of Chief Police Officers (as it was known) in 2013, introduced the category of Absent with the aim of reducing demand for police. During the pilot phase of the introduction, the number of missing investigations was reduced, whilst the number of absent reports increased leading to a saving of 1,700 officer hours, Bayliss and Quinton (2012). It was hoped that by effective use of the risk categories, more officer time would be saved. Shalev Greene and Pakes (2013) however, expressed concern that children reported from care homes with vulnerabilities were being incorrectly risk assessed as No Apparent Risk/Absent which could have serious implications for safeguarding. As mentioned earlier in this section Vo's study (Vo 2015) found that the risk level assigned did not correlate with the risk experienced. This was also the findings of Doyle & Barnes (2020).

Searching activity

When it comes to police activity to locate a missing child, there is very little literature found. A series of evidence-based profiling tools to assist Police Search Advisors (POLSAs) define search areas for missing person investigations was published by Grampian Police (Gibb & Woolnough 2007). POLSAs are generally utilised for high risk missing persons however, so this information is not likely to be used in all missing person cases. Nothing similar has been published since.

There was literature found concerning the use of media appeals to assist in searching for a missing person.   Drivsholm et al. (2017) looked at media appeals for children who go missing for a variety of reasons and durations. They conclude from research in the USA and across Europe that the effectiveness of medial appeals in locating missing children has not been adequately evaluated. For missing children in particular, the appeal is made without their consent, yet it can leave a digital footprint that follows them into adulthood and so their use needs to be proportionate.

The most recent literature focuses on digital media, in Canada Ferguson and Soave (2021) looked at the structure and content of Tweets sent by police over a two-year period and found the inclusion of an image, the use of a # and placing relevant information in the main body of the tweet, rather than including a link increased the number of retweets by users, thus reaching a wider audience.

A UK study of Tweets posted by 1 UK police force between 2011-2018 found that Tweets using a Custody photo of the person was retweeted less than those using regular photos. It also found that Tweets using asking the reader "have you seen..?" and asking them specifically to retweet received higher engagement (Solymosi et al. 2021)

Lampinen and Moore (Handbook of Missing Persons 2016) discuss two types of memory and how appeals must stimulate them both; recognition from a previous encounter with the missing person 'retrospective person memory' and subsequent encounters with the missing person 'prospective person memory' in order to maximise their effectiveness. A further study by Lampinen and Moore (2016) of repeated medial appeals suggests that the public can become less responsive to them and therefore become less effective as a tool to locate missing people.

Building on the literature surrounding medial appeals, Hunt et al. (2020) found that shorter appeals resulted in better recall by readers. More time spend studying their photographs lead to greater identification from a simulated line up and the longer it took the reader to read, the less likely they were to read the whole article and recall information with accuracy. In a further study Hunt et al.(2021) explored the decision-making process of the study participants whether to contact police when they believed they had sighted a missing child. Reasons for not reporting the sighting included lack of confidence in their own recall and not wanting to waste police time. A further consideration

was the reason stated in the appeal for going missing, which might influence their perception of the missing child's lifestyle. This could be viewed as a form of failure demand in the system.

Holmes (Handbook of Missing Persons 2016) highlights that for some, a missing person appeal could increase risk to them. Particularly for older children and young adults who may be vulnerable to exploitation and abuse while away from home, where a public appeal could draw unwanted attention to them. Holmes also comments that disclosing information about health conditions may not be suitable for public appeals or may be discretely referenced as a need for medication.

It is clear that there are lots of factors to consider before releasing a medial appeal as part of the search strategy. Fyfe et al. (2015) conclude that in relation to the conduct of a missing person investigation some of it is formally led by procedures and policies, some by what they term police craft, science and reputational issues. They can be simultaneously structured and fluid. They finish with the question whether missing persons investigations should be carried out by specialists, in the same way as a murder investigation is, or whether the omni-competent patrol officer/detective with a "how to" manual is effective.

A more generalised view of police investigative activity, utilising technology to assist, Taylor and Reilly (2017), suggest development of artificial intelligence and a computer system to guide the process and progress of a missing person investigation by deciding the most relevant search activities from the data entered could support a more bespoke and efficient approach to each investigation, removing the notion of police craft from the process.

Prevention and improvement of the system

It is evident from the literature that the topic of children in care homes going missing repeatedly is not a new phenomenon. Recognised efforts to reduce the prevalence of this issue include the introduction and evolution of the category of 'absent' by the Association of Chief Police Officers in 2013. It was reviewed by the College of Policing, who took over responsibility for issuing national guidance for police forces and redefined missing to be "Anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established will be considered as missing until located, and their well-being or otherwise confirmed". The absent category was renamed 'no apparent risk', bringing it under the risk assessment framework and making it clear that every report required a formal risk assessment upon initial notification and ongoing risk reviews whilst they are missing as an intended improvement to the process (COP 2016).

The Return Home Interview (RHI) process has been maturing since it was first recommended in 1997. They were separated from police safe and well checks, which are a simpler confirmation the child is unharmed in 2009 but were not made a requirement in the process until 2014. The offer of an RHI was mandated by the Department for Education as a means through which the missing child is able to talk in confidence to an independent party about problems or issues that contributed to their going missing, any risks they faced whilst missing or any risk factors in their home, with a view to implementing strategies and solutions to prevent them from going missing again DfE (2014). Pona et al. (2019) produced a graphic (figure 4) detailing the system process a RHI should follow. It consists of three phases:

1. Reach, referring to the spread of RHIs as required by 2014 guidance
2. Delivery, which focuses on who provides RHIs and how they are done
3. Follow-up, once the RHI has taken place which should contain support offered and information sharing

Reporting	Responding	Referring	Offering RHI	Delivering RHI	Recording	Sharing	Follow-up	Oversight
Reach			Delivery		Follow-up			

Source: Pona et al. 2019

The study found that despite this process being in existence, in practice there are several stages along the process where failure demand was seen and have documented recommendations to reduce this in a table (see Appendix 1). Whilst these recommendations exist, it is unclear who if anyone has actioned them.

Boulton et al.(2023) analysed data relating to RHI's in one English police force and found that the quality of them varied in numerous ways, from uptake, adherence to the 72-hour timeframe for completion, the quantity and value of information obtained and variations between commissioned providers to their effectiveness in reducing the number of repeat missing episodes. Here the literature is mixed, but Ofsted (2013) report that RHI's currently are limited in their effectiveness and return interviews were rarely used to determine patterns of behaviour for children who ran away frequently. There are opportunities to realign the results of the RHI to its strategic aims.

An exploratory study using young people as peer interviewers of children who were repeatedly going missing found that the peer relationship uncovered some valuable insight that might not have been gained using adult interviewers, including those preventive punitive measures such as the removal of shoes had the opposite intended effect Taylor et al.(2012).

There have been various attempts by forces individually to reduce the number of repeat missing children reports in their own areas. The Howard League for Penal Reform (2017) researched and reported the following; Sussex police introduced Youth Ambassadors tasked with spreading the message that officers should listen and see the child first, not the problem. West Yorkshire Police have a dedicated crime reduction officer who works with vulnerable children and adults, Sussex Police had their own reporting procedure for homes to run through before calling the police with the aim of preventing criminalising what would otherwise be considered boundary-testing behaviour. They also have regular meetings with Ofsted and share information on a monthly basis. West Yorkshire share missing and call out data from care homes with local Ofsted inspectors, for them to take appropriate action. West Mercia conducted some data analysis to identify inappropriate calls from care homes to police, they then worked with the care homes to educate them, reducing the number of calls they made. Durham Constabulary assigned a dedicated officer to each care home in their area. Dorset Police worked in partnership with key agencies to improve practices and processes resulting in a 49% reduction in callouts from children's homes January-August 2017 compared with the same timeframe the previous year. From this it is clear that forces are working independently to try and solve the problem and focusing on aspects of the process, rather than take a holistic approach.

Literature from the United States covers similar approaches. One study analysed the use of off grounds passes being issued to see an adult actively involved in the support of the child would reduce the number of unauthorised missing episodes (Burford, 2008). The hypothesis being that as the number and duration of off grounds passes increased, the individual would run away less. The study found a weak relationship between these factors. Another American study conducted by Clark et al.(2008) looked at a variation of the RHI. Using a behavioural analyst who asked questions to understand the children's motivation for running away they were able to work with a case worker to

implement suitable interventions. Using a control group and test group they found the average number of missing episodes reduced from 12.6 - 3.0 per year for the test group. For the control group it reduced from 70. to 3.1 during the same period. This supports the UK position that done properly, the RHI process as written should be effective.

Focusing on children in foster care in the United States who repeatedly run away, Crossland and Dunlap (2015) found most literature focused on determining risk factors and triggers, which we too have discussed in a previous section and comments that there is very little on prevention.

Failure Demand

In the introduction we stated that one of the two perspectives we were bringing to the work was that of *failure demand*. This approach to demand analysis focuses on ways in which demand is artificially increased through errors, rework and other mechanisms that generate extra work beyond the minimum needed to address the original demand. These ideas have only been applied in policing on a small number of occasions and then published (See Walley and Adams, 2019; Laufs et al., 2020). Walley and Jennison-Phillips (2018) studied failure demand in non-urgent calls into Gloucestershire Constabulary, where missing young people did feature as once source of demand that was graded as non-urgent. They concluded that mispers did generate failure demand where responses to calls were postponed, incidents were mis-graded and actions to address the underlying reasons for incidents were not followed up on. A number of papers have identified process issues that could generate failure demand (refs) but without using this terminology.

Many of the incidents can be regarded as failure demand if a wider perspective is taken, implying that many decisions or actions (or more precisely lack of action) generate additional work. The process issues identified in Ofsted (2012) show many aspects of services provided encourage repeat incidents. Several local authorities continue to place children in care homes outside of its area, despite cross-boundary placements often contributing to their running away. APPG (2012) documented one local authority, with at least one children's home that it ran in its area, placed all its children outside the local authority boundary. In another county approximately 80% of looked after children had been placed there by an outside authority. In its 2019 report, the APPG commented on the location of care homes, not being where demand is, thus placement decisions are not always being made in the best interests of the child APPG (2019). We should be aware, however, that some out of area placements are necessary to separate vulnerable children from people in their local area who may do them harm, e.g. negative peer networks.

Other findings

Focusing on the police processes of a missing person investigation and quantifying the cost of conducting automatically generated activities carried out by police for a medium risk, medium term missing person, analysis was completed by Shalev Greene and Pakes (2013). They estimated the sum of £1,325.44 . When applied to a real-life case, which included having to make repeat visits to addresses as the occupants were out, the cost increased to £2,415.80. Had their case study been for a child in care, additional tasks would be added further increasing the cost. A notable proportion of the costs related to internal police liaison mechanisms. The leanness of these mechanisms and processes were not in themselves reviewed.

Shalev Greene and Pakes (2013) also performed an evaluation of the use of the "absent" category by six police forces as it was being rolled out nationally. They analysed key roles of those involved in the

missing person process and looked at when police and other agencies worked together to support the investigation. They found variations across and within the forces in their working practices, training, levels of confidence assessing risk and working with partner agencies. From a systems perspective this provides ample evidence of where failure demand could occur in a missing persons investigation.

Discussion

At the start of this report we highlighted three overarching research questions that we are addressing in our work. The discussion will assess the extent to which our research questions can be answered purely from existing validated research and the grey literature evidence base.

Actions to prevent children at risk from going missing

OU research findings show that the patterns and characteristics of missing episodes are widely understood for children in care. The data on missing person incidents is well-collated by agencies such as the Home Office and the scale of the problem and details such as how long people go missing for is widely understood. Almost all of the research points towards two key aspects of missing incidents:

1. In the case of children in care a small number of "hotspot" locations are usually responsible for a large proportion of all missing incidents
2. Once someone has gone missing from care, it is very likely that they will repeat this behaviour on multiple occasions

In the case of young missing persons from care the underlying motivations for going missing are often clear at the aggregate level but it is not so clear whether individuals at risk of going missing are reliably identified before missing incidents occur. There are some structural issues such as the imbalanced locations of care homes away from where demand occurs that tends to increase the extent to which young people are unhappy with their care arrangements and this increases the likelihood of missing incidents occurring.

One of the notable features of the research findings is the lack of evidence about multi-agency working that perhaps was anticipated when the research questions were derived. There have been several research reports that have taken views from multiple agencies to diagnose the issues, but there appears to be very little work to bring these agencies together to devise and implement the solutions.

Activities for agencies to take when a child goes missing

The research shows consistent results about the actual outcomes of most missing incidents. Children from care tend to go missing for relatively short periods of time and tend to be found in predictable locations. However, there appears to be limited progress in providing a coordinated response to missing incidents. There are still debates around how incidents should be graded for risk. Existing proposed policy for police concerns the grading of incidents either as "missing" or absent" but there is little consensus in police forces that this is the best approach. Some forces – possibly justifiably – see all young missing persons incidents as one where vulnerability is a factor and tend to treat all incidents as "missing" rather than downgrade to absent. The process of reporting also appears to be disjointed with care homes not reporting incidents until time has elapsed.

Activities to prevent repeats

The data shows that a high proportion of young people who have gone missing repeat this behaviour. This is an indication that the underlying issues that have created pressure are not being addressed in time. The practice of return home interviews (RHIs) is an attempt to uncover the underlying reasons why an individual has gone missing, but there is a lack of evidence about how impactful these are in practice. If reasons for going missing at an individual level are found then what actions are taken to intervene? The RHI process (Pona, 2019) includes a step of sharing RHI information, but there is no evidence that this occurs (with the police) in most instances. From a policing perspective it simply appears as repeat activity when the person goes missing again.

Conclusions

Missing young people: a significant demand issue as vulnerable individuals

This scoping review has identified the significance of missing young persons both in terms of demand on police and also the impact on society. The literature does show some shift in attitudes towards young people that go missing away from "underserving" of support to people who need assistance in dealing with problems in their lives and who are vulnerable. There are also clear links between missing incidents and the same people involved with the police in other ways and at risk of being drawn into criminal activity or exploited by criminals. However, there are still issues potentially at any local level in moving policing towards more of a social support role acting in collaboration with other services.

The scale of the problem at a national level

The data and papers collected gave a good indication of the scale of the problem, demonstrating that missing young people feature in a large proportion of police demand and it is right to attempt to address this as part of a demand reduction initiative. If successful, this would have benefits for individuals involved, society more generally and the police. The most striking feature of the previous studies that have analysed demand is that they all immediately identify repeat incidents as a key characteristic of the demand. This initially appears as "hot spot" locations of care facilities, where many of those at risk of going missing are housed. However, perhaps the more pressing issue is that once someone in this type of environment does have a missing incident they are more likely to repeat this action on their return. This highlights the factors associated with their disappearance have not been addressed and so they are likely to repeat the behaviour. There is also some evidence of issues on return from missing that may make these people feel more uncomfortable.

Too few evidence-based solutions

Perhaps the most challenging aspect of the findings so far is the limited detail of any actions or initiatives that have addressed these issues successfully. Papers are often good at diagnosing the problems and reporting proposed actions or policy changes, but there is still a dearth of knowledge about evidence-based solutions or how to implement these changes. Many of our research questions about how to proceed currently remain unanswered and this provides an opportunity to develop new ideas.

Next Steps

The next phase of this work starts immediately on completion of this report. Anonymised data will be extracted from the Hertfordshire Constabulary COMPACT database to review missing persons cases that have occurred between 2019 and 2022. The local picture will be compared with national statistics to see if there are any significant differences in the pattern of missing incidents in Hertfordshire that may influence the findings. Locations of the Hertfordshire missing incidents will be assessed for "hotspots" etc.

An analytical instrument will be designed to extract data from case files. A large sample of case reports will be summarised using this instrument, with the intention that 10% of all relevant cases that have occurred over the last 12 months will be assessed. The sample may be adjusted based on the number of incidents available and the information contained.

Each case will broadly be assessed for the following characteristics:

1. The factors that may have influenced the occurrence of a missing incident
2. The absence or presence of any warning signs that a missing incident was likely or possible

3. Any involvement with the police or other agency before a missing incident
4. Any specific vulnerability factors
5. The location, timing, duration, outcome and other characteristics of the missing incident
6. Any summary data from post missing interviews
7. Analysis of history of repeats, including factors such as frequency of missing incidents per individual
8. Any prevention activities that have occurred and an assessment of their level of success, if possible.
9. Any multi-agency involvement in the incident

The entire policing process will be mapped and analysed for failure points and improvement opportunities. This will lead to recommendations for system change.

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Framework about learning from Return Home Interviews (adapted from Pona et al. 2019)

Stage	Key learning points about factors that enable RHI provision	Key Issues for trouble-shooting
Reporting	Police having access to all relevant information for appropriate risk assessments	Lack of notifications and/or information; Over-reporting of some children; Lack of clarity about at-risk children
Responding	On a return of a child adult carers being aware/noting down any relevant information that can be shared	Notifications of missing incidents not timely or not happening
Referring	Single point of referral for RHI for all children. Speedy offer of RHI.	Out of area children not having RHI provider; Delayed notifications; Lack of weekend or holiday referrals
Offering RHI	Attempting contact through different means of communication; Offer of RHI comes with information about purpose & support; Where offer refused consider risk assessment	Lack of parental consent; Relationship building for those going missing frequently; Correct 72-hour deadline
Delivering RHI	Designated RHI staff with specialist skills and training; Child-centeredness and independence form adults; Getting informed consent form child; RHI one to one; Informal approach	Children who refuse RHI lack relationship building; Out of area children have RHI delivered by social worker?
Recording	Having an agreed form for recording of RHI; Accessible IT systems for easy RHI recording; Recording information about RHI helps understand gaps in provision	Incompatible IT systems; Lack of clarity about what is recorded and shared
Sharing	Good shared understanding among stakeholders of what information is important; Only information relevant is shared; Information sharing protocols and forms help shared understanding of risk	Lack of feedback loop on information shared with the police; Lack of information sharing
Follow-up	Receiving needed support following RHI is important; Established pathways for referrals flags for follow-up and monitoring what support is provided helps children receive needed support	Lack of services to refer to; Lack of parental consent; Lack of clarity about follow up
Oversight	Multi-agency groups and structures for oversight; Data on RHI provision etc. helps children most at risk etc.; Commitment to safeguard children	Lack of oversight; Lack of voice of the child

Appendix 2

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