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Missing Persons: Incidence, Issues and Impacts

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Each year, around 30,000 people are reported missing in Australia—one person every 18 minutes. The 30,000 people exceed the total number of victims, reported to police for homicide, sexual assault, and unarmed robbery combined. Nationally, the rate of missing people reported to the police is 1.55 per thousand, and it varies considerably around Australia with South Australia and the Australian Capital Territory have rates double the national average. Children and young people having rates three times those of adults.

Fortunately, nearly all are found, and 86 per cent are located within one week. The social and economic impacts on families, friends, and the community as a whole are profound.

It is estimated that each missing person costs the community about \$2,360—in search costs, loss of earnings while family members look, and health and legal costs. For 30,000 people, this adds to over \$70 million per year.

Relatively little is known about the reasons people go missing, the characteristics of missing persons, and the impact of their disappearance on the community. In 1998, the National Missing Persons Unit (NMPU) at the Australian Bureau of Criminal Intelligence commissioned an independent study to address this information gap and to identify service delivery needs for those affected by the phenomenon of missing persons. This paper summarises that report.

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The study was based on various sources of information. These included an analysis of missing person statistics provided by Australian police and by three non-government tracing organisations—the Salvation Army, Australian Red Cross, and International Social Service (Australia) over a three-year period. A detailed analysis was carried out on 505 missing person police reports, representing all missing persons reported to Australian police during a single week at the mid-point of the three-year period. A national survey of families and friends of 270 people reported missing to police was conducted, using an in-depth structured telephone interview. Consultations were held with over 90 organisations with an interest in missing person issues. The study also included an assessment of the economic and social costs of missing people in the Australian community.

Incidence

Unfortunately, statistics on the incidence of missing persons reported to police across Australia are not routinely compiled, and there is no reliable national trend information available. The rate of missing persons reported to police over the study period 1995-97 was constant at 1.55 per 1,000 people in the general population each year, but varied between jurisdictions and according to age and

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gender (see Table 1). In 1997, children and young persons were reported missing at a rate over three times higher than adults. Adult females showed lower rates than adult males, while female children and young persons showed higher rates than their male counterparts. In 1997, the rates of missing persons in South Australia and Australian Capital Territory were well above the national average, but this was interpreted as a function of different reporting practices in those two jurisdictions (such as taking reports by telephone) rather than to real jurisdictional differences in susceptibility of people going missing.

Including missing persons reported to the three non-government tracing organisations, the rate of missing persons is 1.61 per 1,000 people. In comparison, the rate of road traffic accident deaths in 1995 was 0.1 per 1,000 people and non-fatal road traffic accidents requiring hospitalisation was 1.2 per 1,000 people. The suicide rate was 0.1 per 1,000 people and other crimes, such as robbery and sexual assault, were reported to police at a rate of 0.9 per 1,000 people and 0.7 per 1,000 people respectively in 1995 (Australian Bureau of Statistics figures, cited in Mukherjee and Graycar 1997). The incidence of missing persons is at least as high as that of other issues that generate far more media attention and public interest.

Characteristics of Missing People

Missing person reports to police include a significant proportion of people reported missing from an institution of some kind, such as a psychiatric or general hospital, supported accommodation for the aged or intellectually disabled, or youth supervised care or detention facility (but exclude escapes from prisons or adult correctional facilities). A national estimate of people going missing from these non-correctional institutions was calculated from a one-week sample of all missing person reports received

Table 1: Rates of Missing Persons Reported to Australian Police Services in 1997 (per 1,000 People)

	All Persons	Adult Males	Adult Females	Male Children and Young Persons	Female Children and Young Persons
NSW	1.18	0.96	0.61	1.77	2.63
Vic	1.51	0.94	0.60	3.60	4.23
Qld	1.52	1.15	0.77	2.71	3.60
WA	1.67	1.17	0.94	3.47	3.65
SA	3.20	2.46	1.36	8.33	6.21
Tas	0.46	0.38	0.28	0.63	1.15
ACT	3.55	2.26	1.31	8.93	8.21
NT	1.04	0.83	0.60	1.69	1.82
Australia	1.55	1.14	0.73	3.15	3.62

by police over a one-week period in 1996, and found to be 32 per cent of all reported missing person cases.

The remaining two-thirds of missing people are generally reported missing by families or friends. The national survey provided more detailed information about the characteristics of this group than was routinely available in police reports (see Table 2).

Compared to the general population, people reported missing to police were more likely to be born in Australia and less likely to be living in a rural area, and adult missing persons were somewhat more likely to be unemployed.

Families or friends of the missing persons attributed one or more of a range of “special needs” to the missing person in 46 per cent of cases in the survey.

Table 2: Socio-demographic Characteristics of Missing Persons Based on National Survey

		Percentage
Gender	Male	49
	Female	51
	Total	100
Age	10 and Under	5
	11 to 17	62
	18 to 25	13
	26 to 40	8
	41 to 60	8
	Over 60	5
Total	101	
Country of Birth	Australia	86
	Other English-speaking Country	10
	Non-English-speaking Country	4
	Total	100
Labour Force Status	Currently Employed	19
	Unemployed	11
	Full-time Student	60
	Not Employed—Other Reason	10
	Total	100
Marital Status	Never Married	87
	Married or Defacto Relationship	9
	Divorced or Separated	3
	Widowed	1
	Total	100
Where Living	City or its Suburbs	78
	Rural Town	15
	Country	7
	Total	100
	Lived in Own Home (Alone or Shared)	18
	Lived in Parental Home	66
	Lived with other Non-spouse Relative	8
	Other	8
	Total	100

Table 3: Circumstances of the Missing Person Incident Based on National Survey

		Percentage
Place Last Seen	Own Home	54
	Other Person's Home	6
	School or Travel to/from School	14
	A Public Place (including public transport)	9
	Other	7
	Not Known/Not Stated	10
	<i>Total</i>	<i>100</i>
Time of Day Last Seen	Morning (6-11am)	23
	Afternoon (12-5pm)	18
	Evening (6-11pm)	20
	Night (midnight-5am)	2
	Daytime (exact time not known)	10
	Night-time (exact time not known)	3
	Not Known/Not Stated	24
	<i>Total</i>	<i>100</i>
Day of Week Last Seen	Saturday or Sunday	20
	Friday	20
	Other Weekday	43
	Not Known/Not Stated	17
		<i>Total</i>
Relationship of Person Making Report	Parent	72
	Spouse	4
	Other Relative	18
	Other Person	3
	Not Known/Not Stated	3
		<i>Total</i>
Missing in Company	Went Missing in Company with Another Person	16
		<i>Total</i>

The most common were some form of physical health problem, ranging from mild asthma to insulin-dependent diabetes, and mental health concerns, particularly depression and age-related disorders such as Alzheimer's disease.

Missing people often showed a history of repeat incidents. In the survey, 34 per cent of missing persons had gone missing before the episode under review. In about one-third of those cases, there was only one previous incident, but others involved regular occurrences, up to almost monthly disappearances over a four-year period. A higher proportion (38%) of relevant cases had gone missing within the 18-24 months following the incident that identified them for inclusion in the survey. Half of all cases (50%) had either gone missing before or after the incident, or both. In most cases, these incidents were not reported to police.

Circumstances of the Missing Person Incident

The national survey provided an opportunity to explore the circumstances surrounding the incident for a representative sample of people reported missing to police (but excluding those

reported missing from an institution), see Table 3.

In the majority of cases, the missing person was last seen at home during the daytime hours, with the most common day of week being Friday.

Reason/Explanation for Going Missing

The survey asked families and friends why they believed, at the time, the person went missing, and what explanation was given for the disappearance when the missing person was located. The responses were content analysed, then grouped into four discrete categories, and classed into a miscellaneous "other" group, a "non-specific" group where there was not enough information to discriminate between categories, and "none given/not known" group (see Table 4).

The most common reason families and friends believed at the time to be the reason for going missing, and the most common explanation given afterwards, was conflict about authority, rules, or independent behaviour. At the time the person went missing, there were often fears about safety, but the explanation given after being located rarely supported those concerns, and often fell into the "unintentional" category.

Table 4: Reasons Believed and Explanations Given for Persons Going Missing Based on Survey

Category	Reason Believed (percentage)	Explanation Given (percentage)
Independence/Rebellion (for example, rebellion against parental authority, wanting to be independent, responding to peer pressure, conflict over family rules)	21	24
Safety Concerns (for example, suicide, abduction, accident, or non-specific concerns over self-harm or harm by others)	19	1
Unintentional (for example, confusion over times/arrangements to meet, wandering/lost because of dementia, forgetting to advise others of a planned absence)	6	22
Escaping Adverse consequences (for example, to avoid adverse consequences such as financial difficulties, threat of violence, parental discipline for specific infraction)	11	12
Other	11	14
Non-specific	15	8
None Given/Not Known	17	19
	<i>Total</i>	<i>100</i>

Outcomes of Reported Missing Person Incidents

The location rates for all people reported missing to police, based on annual statistics recorded by police missing person units, were uniformly high across the three-year period 1995-97 and across jurisdictions, falling above 95.5 per cent in all cases, and usually above 99 per cent. Only two people reported missing to police over the one-week sample of missing person reports in 1996 (excluding persons missing from institutions) were still missing in early 1998. In the survey, only two people were still listed as missing at the time of interview, some 18-24 months later. This calculates to a 99.4 per cent and 99.3 per cent location rate respectively.

The missing person was located quickly in the majority of cases (usually within the first two days), most commonly spending the time while missing at a friend's home or with friends. The missing person was generally located because he or she returned home, or made contact, or was found by family and friends rather than by police (see Table 5).

Impacts on the Australian Community

The survey asked a series of structured questions to identify the extent of impact in five specific areas—health, work, emotions, quality of life, and relationships (including the number of persons affected and the extent of the impact), see Table 6. The extent of impact was rated by the interviewer based on respondents' responses to a specific question on how severe they considered the impact was in each area. To receive a rating of major impact, the respondent's assessment needed to be supported by confirmatory evidence. This included number of days lost from work in the case of employment impacts, or visits to the doctor in the case of health

Table 5: Circumstances of Location, Based on National Survey

		Percentage
When Located	On Same Day as Reported Missing	35
	On Next Day After Report	27
	2 Days to One Week After Report	24
	8 to 31 Days After Report	7
	Over 1 Month After Report	6
	Not Located	1
	<i>Total</i>	<i>100</i>
How Located	Missing Person Returned/Made Contact	42
	Located By Police	18
	Located By Family/Friend Search Action	33
	Other	6
		<i>Total</i>
Where Located	At Friend's Home or With Friends	47
	Other Home	10
	Public Place (For Example, On Street, Beach, and Train)	20
	Other (For Example, Refuge, Own Car, and Hotel)	19
	Not Known/Not Stated	4
		<i>Total</i>

impacts. Concrete examples of life changes were needed to support a rating of major quality of life impact (for example, elderly grandparents taking up permanent responsibility for a handicapped grandchild after the mother went missing, or structured recreational activities ceased for an extended period). Major emotional impacts were assessed on the basis of respondents' assessments only, and relationship impacts were not rated according to severity of impact.

Survey respondents also identified impacts in other areas. These included direct financial impacts, difficulties in maintaining or disposing of property belonging to the missing person, and education impacts such as extensive time off school and poor examination performance.

Families and friends (and in some cases the missing persons themselves) suffer significant health, work, quality of life,

emotional, relationship, economic, and other impacts associated with the missing person incident. For every case of a missing person, an average of at least 12 other people are affected in some way. Based on the annual number of reported missing person cases, a very conservative estimate of the number of people affected each year is over one-third of a million. For some of these people, the impact is ongoing for years and even decades.

The economic cost to the Australian community was estimated using a range of information sources. Full details of the methodology applied and the sources used are provided in Henderson and Henderson (1998). Unit cost was calculated per missing person incident by apportioning estimated costs in each category across the missing person population, using the national survey as a basis for determining the distribution of

Table 6: Percentage of Survey Respondents Reporting Impact in Five Areas

	Health	Work	Quality of Life	Emotional	Relationship
ANY IMPACT					
Percentage of Cases	37	49	94	99	58
Total Persons Affected	145	229	1647	3116	-
Average no. Persons Affected Per Case	0.5	0.9	6.1	11.5	-
MAJOR IMPACT					
Percentage of Cases	22	21	43	73	-
Total Persons Affected	77	92	364	668	-
Average no. Persons Affected Per Case	0.3	0.3	1.3	2.5	-

cases in those instances where the cost estimate was relevant to only a proportion of cases (for example, Australians missing overseas or loss of earnings for days lost off work). This is a conservative calculation as various cost components could not be reliably estimated from the information sources available.

Overall, the estimated economic cost of locating missing people and the associated immediate health and employment-related costs are estimated at a

minimum of \$2,360 for every missing person reported to police (see Table 7). Using a similar basis for calculating costs associated with missing people reported to the three non-government tracing organisations, a figure of \$1,851 is spent on every case. Extrapolating the 1997 missing person population (both police and tracing organisation clients), an estimate of over \$72 million is spent in the Australian community (at 1997 dollars), without taking into account the long-term

impact on families and friends of the missing person. For example, including an estimate of the cost of lost lifetime earnings from missed education by missing persons reported to police adds another \$19 million.

Service Effectiveness

The national survey asked a series of questions about satisfaction with the services provided by police and any other agencies associated with locating the missing person, as well as experiences with services providing support to the families and friends of missing people.

Most people reported they were satisfied with the service provided by police at each of three stages—initial reporting, investigation, and outcome advice/follow-up stage (83%, 73%, and 71% of relevant cases respectively). Specific areas for improvement most commonly identified were perceived delays before taking action (in particular, there was a misconception that police policy required a 24-hour wait before a missing person report could be made) and more contact and feedback to families. A sympathetic and understanding approach at the time of taking the initial report was the most commonly identified positive feature. Existing support services were not used by a large proportion of people, most often because people “did not feel the need”, but there was strong support for the establishment of a specialised missing person support service. However, the sorts of services people considered it should provide varied and included direct search assistance, emotional and practical support, information provision, and support after the missing person was located.

Areas of Need

Information from the national survey, interviews with other families and friends of missing people, consultation with govern-

Table 7: Estimated Costs per Missing Person Incident Reported to Police (at 1997 dollars)

	Estimated Cost Per Case (\$)
LOCATION COSTS	
Police Location Costs	351.00
National Missing Person Unit Costs	6.49
Search Costs Directly Incurred by Families and Friends	128.15
Other Agency Search Costs in Assisting Police	401.05
Additional Costs of Australians Missing Overseas	2.11
Search Costs by Departments with Specific Client Responsibilities	not costed
Costs of Inquiries into Agency Records	not costed
Business and Community Contributions	not costed
Costs of Return of the Missing Person When Located	not costed
Media and Publicity Costs	not costed
EMPLOYMENT RELATED COSTS	
Loss of Earnings for Time Off Work or Business	272.05
Industry and Public Sector Costs of Lost Work Days	425.23
Productivity Loss Through Impaired Work Performance	13.20
Costs Associated with Loss or Change of Employment	44.02
Lifetime Earnings Lost Through Missed Education	654.33
Costs of Government Benefits and Revenue Loss	not costed
Lost Opportunity Costs by Organisations Assisting with Searches	not costed
HEALTH COSTS	
Medical Services (Consultation, Hospitalisation, Prescriptions)	235.92
Costs of Counselling Services	16.87
Pain and Suffering	not costed
Ongoing Health Vulnerability	not costed
SUPPORT TO MISSING PERSON WHILE MISSING	
Supported Accommodation and Services	25.00
Advisory and Other Services for Missing Persons	not costed
Government Allowances and Benefits	not costed
PREVENTION, ADVOCACY AND POLICY FUNCTIONS	
Policy and Other Involvement by Non-core organisations	not costed
Client Advice and Support from Non-core Agencies	not costed
Specific Prevention Initiatives by non-core Agencies	not costed
Sponsorship and Promotion Initiatives by Non-core Agencies	not costed
OTHER DIRECT COSTS TO FAMILIES/FRIENDS	
Legal Costs	160.70
Other Direct Costs	277.78
OTHER COSTS	
Relationship and Quality of Life Impacts	not costed
Crime Costs	not costed
Fear of Crime Impacts from Media Coverage of Some Cases	not costed
Generational Costs (for example, Impacts on Children of Missing People)	not costed

ment and non-government agencies and community groups, and from national and international research, point to a number of areas for action. The need for effective support services for families and friends of missing persons was the single issue raised most consistently in the survey and interviews. The type of support identified varied from acute emotional crisis support to specialised support specific to the needs of families and friends of long-term missing cases. Two issues in relation to police policy and practice were commonly raised as areas for improvement. These were perceived delays in taking action when the missing person was first reported and contact with families and friends to provide feedback on what is occurring after the report has been made. Access to government information to assist in tracing missing people was also an important issue, particularly in tracing long-term missing cases.

Overall, families and friends of missing persons were generally satisfied with the services provided in locating the missing person. The most significant unmet need was for both immediate and long-term support for families. Priority areas identified in the study to address that need were the provision of information and practical advice to assist families and friends in searching, specialised training in unresolved grief counselling, and missing person support needs for existing agencies especially training in missing person issues for telephone counselling service providers, promoting understanding of missing person issues among special need support groups, and establishment of specialised self-help groups for families of long-term missing persons. These are priority areas for the National Missing Persons Unit (NMPU).

The Policy Response

The study concluded that a national approach to missing people is critical. The NMPU provides a national coordination function as well as support to State and Territory police services in locating long-term missing person cases. Education and public awareness strategies provide a better level of understanding about missing person issues in the community as well as helping to locate specific cases. Through the work of missing person agencies and groups, the particular needs of those people affected by the phenomenon of missing person are being increasingly recognised and addressed. However, there is still a lot that needs to be done. For example, little is known about effective prevention strategies, in both an Australian and an international context.

Although a number of innovative prevention and “consequence-minimisation” strategies were identified through consultation with community and government organisations, there is generally little information available about their operation or effectiveness. There is a critical need for monitoring, research, and evaluation to determine what works for whom and under what circumstances in preventing missing person incidents, and in minimising the impacts and consequences of someone going missing. Fruitful areas to explore include research on repeat incidents, the links between homelessness and missing persons, and the effectiveness of education and awareness raising programs. Finding ways to reduce, or preferably to avoid, the social and economic costs associated with missing people needs to be addressed by the community, government, non-govern-

ment organisations, the business sector, media, and missing persons themselves.

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