

Missing persons in Australia

Marianne James, Jessica Anderson and Judy Putt

Investigating missing persons cases is a complex field. There is no single service responsible for the investigation or the provision of support to those who are found, or to the family and friends of missing persons. However, police services across Australia play a crucial role in responding to reports of missing people, complemented by non-government search agencies such as The Salvation Army and the Australian Red Cross. Since national research on missing persons was conducted 10 years ago, there have been a range of initiatives to improve the response to reports of missing people, particularly in the promotion of a national approach. However, police data suggest there may be more people going missing than ever before, but until there are better data this cannot be clarified with any confidence. Nor can we properly identify risk factors amongst different groups of missing persons. The potential role of the non-government sector to assist searches and prevent people from going missing seems unfulfilled, largely due to poor levels of awareness and lack of resources. This paper identifies key priorities for further development to improve practices related to reducing the incidence of missing persons and the provision of services.

Toni Makkai
Director

The diversity of the missing persons population presents a challenge in terms of the nature of the search, the type of support required by the families and friends of missing persons, and ultimately the support required by the missing persons themselves should they return or be located. People who go missing come from every walk of life. Some people go missing intentionally because they have made the decision that they need to spend time away from their normal lives; some go missing involuntarily. Examples of the latter include child abduction by either an estranged parent or a stranger, an older person with dementia, a homicide, an accident or misadventure, or displacement following a war or territorial conflict. The person could have gone missing from foster care or an institution, or they may have gone missing while travelling overseas. Their disappearance may have been reported to the police or another search agency, or it may not have been reported to anyone at all. There have been two major national studies in Australia that involved research on missing persons, with the last one undertaken nearly a decade ago (Henderson & Henderson 1998; Swanton et al. 1988). Previous research relied primarily on a survey of families and friends of missing persons to identify demographic characteristics of those missing and satisfaction with services (Henderson, Henderson & Kiernan 2000). This paper summarises key findings from a recent national project that builds on the earlier work, by updating information on recorded incidents and by focusing on current responses and potential preventative measures. Commissioned by the National Missing Persons Coordination Centre (NMPCC) in the Australian Federal Police and the Family and Friends of Missing Persons Unit (FFMPU) in the Attorney General's Department of New South Wales, the main themes in the research relate to the characteristics of those who go missing, risk factors associated with going missing, and current responses to reported cases, both in terms of searching for the missing person and by providing support to those affected.

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GPO Box 2944
Canberra ACT 2601
Australia
Tel: 02 6260 9272
Fax: 02 6260 9293

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The research identified gaps in the missing persons agenda, which are grouped into five related areas of action:

- police missing persons procedures and data collection
- family rights, legislation and access to other agencies' information, including improving information sharing between agencies and overcoming any perceived or real barriers as a result of privacy legislation and organisational impediments
- determination of risk and protective factors and at risk groups, updating procedures and identifying potential partner agencies
- identifying good practice, implementing strategies and educating police, stakeholders and the public on missing persons
- application of good practice and intervention models, evaluation, feedback to lead agencies, particularly the NMPCC, for the development of more effective strategies and research.

A more detailed account of the research is available in the full report on the project (see James, Anderson & Putt 2008).

Although to go missing is not in itself a crime, law enforcement plays an important front-line role by responding to reports of missing persons. In Australia, the law enforcement definition of a missing person is 'someone whose whereabouts is

unknown and there are serious concerns for their safety and welfare' (National Missing Persons Coordination Centre n.d.). This definition generally includes anyone reported missing from an institution, but excludes escapees from custody.

Research project

The specific objectives of the research project were to: update existing data on missing persons from all Australian state and territory sources with a view to identifying 'at risk' groups; identify good practice in relation to preventative measures, early intervention, support services and referral mechanisms; develop a more networked approach to policy and practice; and identify and establish a solid base for future research.

The project involved the following key components:

- a review of Australian and overseas research and related literature
- the compilation of national data from police services across Australia, The Salvation Army Family Tracing Service and the Australian Red Cross Tracing Service, for 2005–06
- consultations with key stakeholders that included an online survey of service providers, face-to-face interviews with representatives of 23 organisations in six jurisdictions, the distribution of a questionnaire to a small group of families and friends, and a national roundtable.

The focus of the research was on the national missing persons sector as a whole, and included the police, non-government search agencies, the FFMPU and other relevant service providers. Each police jurisdiction in Australia has a designated missing persons unit or its equivalent. Funded by the Australian Government and situated within the Australian Federal Police, the NMPCC has the role of coordinating and promoting a national integrated approach to reduce the incidence and impact of missing persons.

Non-government search agencies include The Salvation Army Family Tracing Service, the Australian Red Cross Tracing Service, Link-Up Aboriginal Corporation and the International Social Service. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade also assists when people go missing overseas.

The only designated service in Australia involved in counselling and support services for missing persons, their families and friends is the FFMPU, which is situated within the Victims Services in the Attorney-General's Department of New South Wales.

How many people go missing?

Police data for the period 2005–06 indicated that the rate of missing persons reported to the police was 1.5 per 1,000 of the Australian population (Table 1). Similar to the 1997 data several jurisdictions had rates well above the national average, which is attributed to different reporting practices (Henderson, Henderson & Kiernan 2000). There were almost equal numbers of males and females, and young people accounted for just over one-half of all missing persons. When this is added to the figures provided by the non-police agencies (The Salvation Army Family Tracing Service recorded 2,500 incidents and the Australian Red Cross Tracing Service 2,098 incidents) the rate of missing persons in Australia for the period 2005–06 increased to 1.7 per 1,000 Australians. This estimated rate is slightly higher than the previous estimate reported by Henderson and Henderson (1998) and equates to approximately 35,000 people. However, this estimate needs to be treated with caution – for example, not all jurisdictions are able to identify those who are reported missing

Table 1. Missing persons reported to the police, 2005–06

Jurisdiction	Total missing	Males	Females	Young people	Rate ^a
ACT	1,078	504	574	738	3.3
NSW	9,788	5,080	4,708	5,068	1.4
NT	431	207	224	233	2.1
Qld ^b	5,768	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	2.8
SA	4,915	2,532	2,383	2,923	3.2
Tas	207	113	94	n.a.	0.4
Vic	5,584	2,801	2,766	2,877	1.1
WA	2,517	1,265	1,252	1,035	1.2
Total	30,288	12,502	12,001	12,874	1.5

a: Rate per 1,000 population based on 2006 ABS population estimates

b: Total numbers for Queensland could not be obtained therefore an estimate was calculated based on previous numbers of missing persons in the state as well as an average of percentage increases in other jurisdictions. This number was used to calculate the rate for Queensland, and also in the calculation of the total missing for Australia.

n.a. Not available

Source: State and territory police statistics provided to the AIC; Victoria Police (2006)

more than once per year, and there may be a significant number of unreported missing persons incidents. In addition, the non-government services may be involved in tracing people who lost contact with family members many years ago.

Data quality is a significant issue which considerably compromises any attempt to estimate numbers of missing persons in Australia. As well as inconsistencies in definitions of key variables across jurisdictions and jurisdictional differences in data entry processes, there are no unique identifiers within datasets and no linkages between datasets across jurisdictions for missing persons.

Although it is not possible to accurately estimate the numbers of unreported missing persons, the research indicated that certain subgroups in the population would seem more likely to be unreported. These include young people, homeless people, people with an intellectual disability, people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, Indigenous Australians, and gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender people, gender questioning and same-sex attraction. Research from the United States indicates that one-fifth of episodes involving young people running away were not reported to the police (Hammer, Finkelhor & Sedlak 2002).

Different categories of missing persons

Studies into the reasons people go missing have tended to look at different categories of people – adults, young people, victims of foul play and long-term missing. Efforts to identify reasons are affected by what is known about incidents, as several key reasons for going missing are less likely to be recorded or known by the police or other tracing agencies. For example, it is unlikely that families would identify the existence of child abuse when reporting a young person missing. In a similar manner, domestic violence is also unlikely to be revealed. It is also unlikely that issues surrounding a person's mental health status or a young person's sexuality would be disclosed. This could particularly be the case in rural communities, and constitutes a hidden or underestimated dimension to

reasons for going missing that has been under-researched.

A recent Australian study examined 357 missing persons cases and analysed 26 variables to produce key characteristics of those who committed suicide and of those who had been a victim of foul play (Foy 2006). Another subcategory of missing persons is those who go missing for six months or longer. A previous estimate is that only two percent of missing persons will still be missing after six months, which equates to about 700 people across Australia. Based on the police data, it seems long-term missing people were more likely to be adults, and a United Kingdom study found adult males were more likely to remain missing for one year or more (Newiss 2005).

Much earlier international research has focused on young people, especially in the United States where reporting young people who are missing is prioritised. In the United States, where running away is a status offence (violations of laws for which only children can be charged), young people constitute almost 90 percent of reported cases, with the majority having run away and approximately one-third having been abducted.

In Australia, police data indicate over one-half of the reported cases per year involve young people, with females consistently outnumbering males across the jurisdictions. New South Wales police data showed that twice as many reported incidents involved young females, although it is not known how many might involve individuals who have gone missing more than once during the year (NSW Police Force pers. comm.). The New South Wales data also indicate that 13 to 15-year-olds were at the highest risk of running away. Across the jurisdictions, police statistics also indicated that the number of young people running away from youth institutions or supervised accommodation when under some sort of care or control order was high. Significantly, in the United Kingdom, a study estimated that one in five young missing persons had been told to leave by a parent (Biehal & Wade 2004).

Why people go missing

In the main, overseas research that has attempted to identify factors associated with the risk of going missing has focused on persons who have decided to go missing (notably young people) and on adults where there are unintentional absences (notably adults with mental health or incapacity issues) (e.g. Biehal & Wade 2004; Dedel 2006; Tarling & Burrows 2004).

There are no data currently in Australia to comprehensively identify risk factors amongst the known adult missing persons population. However, various jurisdictional data do record categories of missing persons, and these relate to some of the main reasons a person may be missing. For example, in 2005–06, New South Wales and South Australian police recorded more than one-quarter of reported incidents involving missing persons with mental health problems. Police data in South Australia also showed that many of the people who had gone missing in the 'lost/wandered' category were aged 65 years or more.

Australian research has found that reasons for adults going missing included escape, being lost and forgetful, mental health reasons and suicide (Henderson & Henderson 1998). Consultations with key informants and responses to the online questionnaire highlighted mental health problems, alcohol and drug problems, and family violence/conflict. A growing area of concern as the population ages is the risk of those suffering Alzheimer's disease and dementia going missing. There has been very little research on specific triggers, such as personal crises due to financial problems or bereavement, although research overseas indicates that people in crisis may go missing to resolve or escape from difficulties (Biehal, Mitchell & Wade 2003).

Specific risk factors for young people going missing include domestic violence/family conflict, child abuse and neglect, school problems such as bullying, problems with peers/teachers, illicit drug/alcohol use, mental health issues, racism and poor coping skills (Henderson & Henderson 1998).

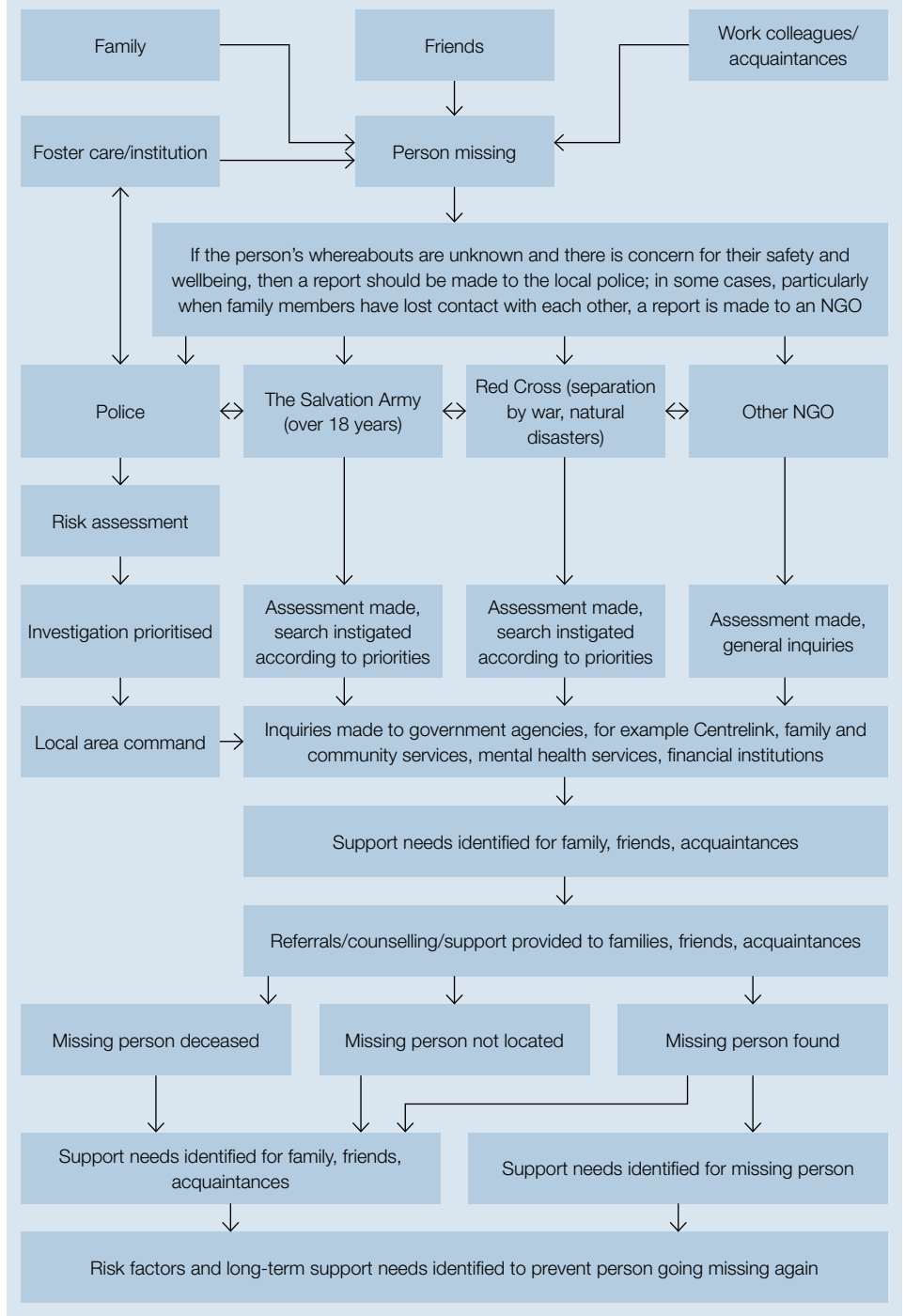
Similar reasons were stressed by the police in their responses to the online questionnaire and during the national roundtable of key stakeholders, notably family conflict or violence, issues associated with puberty and peer pressure, mental health issues, and drug and alcohol problems. As the majority of young people who have been placed in care may have experienced abuse, family conflict or violence, it is these underlying issues that may be contributing to problematic behaviours, including running away.

Searching for missing persons

Figure 1 outlines the various steps in the investigation/search process. The majority of people who are reported as missing in Australia are located within a short period of time. For instance, in Victoria in 2005–06 almost 90 percent of missing persons reported to police were located within seven days. Police services across Australia expect to respond to at least one missing persons report each day, with New South Wales recording the most – at least 25 reports each day. The role of the Missing Persons Unit or its equivalent is to monitor all missing person reports and assist the investigation. Depending on the perceived seriousness of the case, the investigation may be carried out by local police or the state crime command.

Risk assessment procedures are particularly important for the police because of the high volume of missing persons reports they receive. The challenge for police is to respond effectively to all reports and to identify those that require a more urgent and intensive response. Each police jurisdiction currently has its own policies and procedures but there is typically a preliminary investigation. If the person is not found within a short time and the police assessment indicates the need for more intensive search, a follow-up investigation is instigated. This can involve contacting agencies, family, friends in Australia or overseas who may have knowledge of the person's whereabouts and accessing bank accounts. If the person is still not found after a period of time, relevant medical and dental records

Figure 1: Framework for investigations/searches for missing persons



are obtained, a DNA sample may be obtained from a close relative, and a missing person poster may be distributed to all police stations. Police reported that, in general, regular contact is maintained with the family, next of kin or enquirer throughout the investigation, the frequency of contact is affected by the length of time the person has been missing and specific factors related to the case.

Priority ratings for each case are used to determine the degree of risk to which people could be more or less exposed. Risk assessment can be divided into high, medium and low risk to determine the priority of the investigation. Categories can include age (children and older people are considered to be in a high risk category), the harm the person may present to either themselves or the public and a

determination whether or not the behaviour was out of character. The NMPCC is currently formulating national guidelines for the risk assessment of a missing persons report. However, further refinement of risk assessment categories will depend on improved data and research.

Effective coordination with other government and non-government agencies can be an important part of police investigations. In 2002 Australian law enforcement agencies endorsed a national and coordinated approach based on four key principles: prevention, location, education and support. These recognise that good inter-agency collaboration is essential for undertaking effective missing persons interventions. Examples of successful interagency cooperation in Australia that could provide guidance on how a similar approach could be applied to missing persons cases include the Family Violence Intervention Project in the Australian Capital Territory and the Joint Investigation Response Team in New South Wales (NSW), which is a partnership between the NSW Police and the Department of Community Services to investigate child abuse and neglect.

Appropriate protocols and guidelines between police, child protection agencies and other relevant departments to facilitate communication about responsibilities and the timely sharing of information would seem particularly important to prevent young people in care from going missing, and to assist investigations when they do. Specific risk assessment procedures for young missing persons, including those who run away from support accommodation or care, have been developed in the UK and the US but not yet in Australia.

A major barrier to successful searches for missing persons, identified during consultations and through the online survey, is accessing timely information from relevant services such as banks and key government agencies. Privacy legislation was singled out as a major inhibitor that may prevent any personal information being provided. Because going missing is not a crime, even the police can experience difficulties in accessing information.

The Salvation Army Family Tracing Service has often encountered difficulties in obtaining information because of concerns about privacy legislation. Representatives of outreach services interviewed during the consultations also underlined their reluctance to pass on information to police or other search agencies, as the clients may see this as a breach of trust.

The Service is the main non-government search agency assisting with adult missing persons. It only searches for adult members of the immediate family where the aim of the person searching is for the purpose of reunification with the family.

Support and counselling

The research findings highlighted the need for effective support services for families and friends of missing persons. Support was defined in different ways. Some needed practical search assistance, information and advice, while others needed more practical support in managing their day-to-day lives. Some would have preferred professional counselling from the beginning, while others felt their emotional needs could be met by family and friends.

Mediating reunions between missing people after they have been found and their families is an area which requires specialised counselling services. These services often already exist in other areas of individual or family dysfunction, and include counselling services and interventions for family violence, child abuse and neglect, illicit drug and alcohol abuse, and mental health.

The poor response rate to the online questionnaire, particularly from non-government agencies, suggests that many of these services do not consider missing persons, their families or friends as a specific client group. This would indicate a need for increasing awareness in key sectors that work with clients who fall into risk categories associated with going missing, and amongst generic support and counselling services from which families and friends, a returned or found missing person, may benefit.

In NSW, the FFMPU has developed services and resources specifically dedicated to families and friends of missing

persons. This includes the provision of specialist counselling services as well as information, referral and support services. The FFMPU also works in close liaison with the NSW Police Service MPU and non-government search agencies. A national approach to supporting those left behind when someone goes missing is currently being developing by the NMPCC.

Early intervention/prevention

Good practice and early intervention and prevention for missing persons needs to be based on programs that address the risk and protective factors surrounding why people go missing. There are individual, family and community risk factors common to many social problems, and it is important to consider how preventative strategies to address one may also influence other adverse behaviours or events.

A large proportion of missing persons reported to the police are young people who run away repeatedly from either home or care. Many of the factors attributed to young people who go missing are similar to factors correlated with young people who are involved in offending and illicit drug/alcohol abuse, or as victims of child abuse or neglect. As a result, the most relevant prevention frameworks that appear to apply to young people who go missing include developmental crime prevention and early intervention, preventing child abuse and neglect, and preventing youth suicide.

Similarly, prevention strategies based on mental health, family and domestic violence, substance abuse and suicide prevention could be used to address strategies to prevent adults going missing, particularly for vulnerable groups such as older people, culturally and linguistically diverse people, and Indigenous people.

There are many current interventions and prevention projects within the community services sector that are likely to be working with key groups within the missing person population. Identifying and enhancing current initiatives, rather than creating new ones, seems an effective way to implement strategies to potentially reduce the number of missing persons.

Conclusions

Since national research was last conducted in Australia 10 years ago, there have been considerable steps taken to improve responses including development of the FFMPU in NSW, federal funding to support a range of activities, a nationally agreed policing policy and increased efforts to progress an enhanced national database held by CrimTrac.

Effective coordination between government and non-government agencies is an important factor in both missing persons investigations and in the provision of support and counselling services. Joint protocols can provide valuable clarification of the respective responsibilities of agencies involved with missing persons, as well as processes through which to refer information. These agencies can include the police, drug and alcohol services, mental health services, child protection and family violence services, and non-government search agencies. In the case of young people who run away from care, protocols would offer clear guidance on how to respond to unauthorised absences from care which, in turn, would ensure an appropriate coordinated response based on a robust framework that would best ensure the safety of the child.

While the nature of the missing persons sector is ambiguous, a clear national leadership role taken by the NMPCC for the coordination of missing persons delivery will ensure that the significant achievements which have already occurred in the past few years will continue to gain momentum. This would be reflected in the investigation and searches for missing persons, support and counselling services, education and early intervention, and preventative strategies. It would also ensure that Australia plays

a clear leadership role in the international approach to missing persons.

In brief, key priorities for the missing persons sector currently being addressed, but where further development is needed, include:

- the implementation of uniform standards for data collection and data entry/recording processes across all police jurisdictions
- appropriate guidelines for the implementation of risk assessment categories and for sharing or disclosure of information to police and/or search agencies
- specialised training of police and staff within key agencies involved with missing persons incidents
- post-return interviews to ascertain why people go missing and provide an opportunity for appropriate referrals to be made
- increased awareness amongst service providers of how they may prevent people from going missing and how they can support those affected by missing person incidents
- increased focus on how both the government and non-government sectors can complement police and other search agencies' efforts to locate missing persons
- specific research into certain sub-populations more likely to not report to the police
- research on key groups that may be at risk of unintentionally going missing or who go missing repeatedly, such as those with mental health problems, the intellectually disabled and sufferers of dementia/Alzheimer's diseases.

- further research on those people who go missing in the longer term and who may have been the victim of a crime such as abduction or homicide.

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