

Missing Adults

Key Points

- 34% of all missing person reports relate to adults (NPIA, 2011: 16)
- Substantially more adult males are reported missing than adult females (Biehal, Mitchell and Wade, 2003: 10)
- Unemployment, disability and mental health issues are more prevalent amongst adults who go missing than in the general population (Biehal et al, 2003, Tarling and Burrows, 2004)
- The primary reason for adults going missing was due to relationship breakdown within their family, followed by drifting away, mental health issues, or escaping a negative situation (Biehal et al, 2003: 14-21)

Background

Less is known about the circumstances surrounding adults going missing than it is about children and young people. However, some research has been conducted into missing adults which offers a general picture and allows for a greater understanding of what is a wide-reaching issue. Most of what is known about missing adults is derived from a 2003 research study conducted by researchers from the University of York. The study, entitled *Lost from View: Missing persons in the UK* (Biehal et al, 2003) examines data from the charity Missing People, then the National Missing Persons Helpline. Cases reported to the charity tend to be those longer term cases which have been open for more than 48 hours, by which time the majority of police cases have been resolved. The charity also works on a number of cases that are not subject to a police investigation (family search cases). This means that the characteristics of the charity's cases sometimes diverge from those of police cases. (Newiss, 2011: 13-14).

What are the characteristics of missing adults?

Statistics show that 34% of all missing person reports pertain to adults, meaning around 110,000 reports are made concerning missing adults in the UK each year (NPIA, 2011: 16). Research has also highlighted that adult males are more likely to be reported missing than adult females; analysis of a sample of cases reported to Missing People shows that just under three-quarters of those relating to adults pertained to men (Biehal et al, 2003: 10).

Lost from View found that those aged between 24 – 30 years were reported missing most frequently. This was followed by those aged 18 – 23 years. From 30 years, there was a gradual reduction of missing person reports (Biehal et al 2003). A study of Metropolitan Police missing person cases appears to corroborate this, showing that 28% of missing person reports filed in the sample they took pertained to adults aged between 25 and 45 years, and that there was a reduction in reports of adults older than this age group (Tarling and Burrows, 2004).

In a sample study, *Lost from View* found that 23% of missing adults were unemployed and a further 11% were unable to work due to health or disability; little over half of those surveyed had been in employment or education. The comparatively low levels of employment impact on income, with just 42% fully supporting themselves, and the remainder relying on state benefits (32%), or other means (26%), such as a pension or support from their parents or partner (Biehal et al, 2003: 12). Similarly, unemployment has been found to be high amongst missing people, with 60 per cent of those aged between 20 and 60 years – where employment information was available – being out of work when they were reported as missing (Tarling and Burrows, 2004: 19).

Lost from View suggests that 39% of adults reported missing have a health condition or disability. Mental health problems were reported by large numbers of missing people, with 22% stating that they had depression, and 9% reporting other mental health issues (Biehal et al, 2003: 11). Similarly, Tarling and Burrows' study found that "...nearly one-half of the sample, 46%, were said to be suffering from some form of mental illness, and 16% were suspected of possibly committing suicide or of harming themselves" (Tarling and Burrows, 2004: 19).

Why do adults go missing?

Unless they are within the criminal justice system or detained under various sections of the Mental Health Act, adults are free to choose to go missing, and around two thirds of missing adults in a study of cases held by Missing People had decided to leave (Biehal et al, 2003: 15).

Lost from View found, through surveying previously missing adults, that 19% had unintentionally lost contact with family and friends, and had 'drifted' out of touch over time, rather than making a conscious effort to leave. A further 16% had left 'unintentionally', and 1% had been forced to leave. More than half of those 'unintentionally' missing had experienced dementia or other mental health problems (Biehal et al, 2003: 14-21).

The same study found that the main reasons for adults going missing were (Biehal et al, 2003: 14-21):

- Relationship breakdown within the family (30%)
- Drifting (19%, e.g. moving house)
- Mental health problems, such as depression (around 11%)
- Escape (8%, to escape a crisis or stress)

Other reasons included (Biehal et al, 2003: 14-21):

- Alcohol misuse
- Financial worries
- Job loss
- Undisclosed childhood abuse
- Violence
- Transient lifestyles
- Conflicts over autonomy (especially for young adults)

Clearly, the above reasons are not mutually exclusive; many people who go missing do so for several, possibly interrelated, reasons.

What do adults experience whilst missing?

71% of adults surveyed as part of the *Lost from View* study described how being missing had positive aspects attached to it; cohering with the finding that approximately two thirds of adults had left intentionally. The feeling of independence and freedom from family-imposed restrictions were mentioned by adults of all ages, as well as the ability to make a fresh start and leave behind a negative situation (Biehal et al, 2003: 27-31).

Yet, just as young missing people face risks while they are away, missing adults face a variety of problems too; over one third (36%) of adults had felt themselves to be in danger at some point while they were missing (ibid). While many missing adults leave to start a new life elsewhere, 28% of missing adults in a study of Missing People cases had slept rough while missing, with homelessness found to be particularly associated with increased risk (ibid).

Approximately half of adults worried about returning to where they had left whilst missing. This was particularly true for those who went missing as the result of financial concerns, or due to alcohol or drugs (ibid). Just over half of adults sought help whilst away, ranging from informal sources, such as friends and family, to more formal means, like helplines and statutory services.

How long do adults stay missing and what are the outcomes?

The length of time that a person remains missing depends on the circumstances in which they went missing. Tarling and Burrows' found, however, that a large majority of missing person cases are resolved very quickly, with 92% of missing people traced within a week of the initial police report being made, and 99% within one year (Tarling and Burrows, 2004: 20). These figures include cases of children going missing, which appear to be solved more quickly on average than adult cases.

Although not all missing people return, a substantial proportion resume contact with the people they left behind. *Lost from View*, a study based mainly on adults, reports that further to the 19% of missing adults who returned to the place they had left, 39% made some sort of contact. The remaining 42%, however, decided not to make contact with those looking for them. This was generally because they had originally left to escape a negative situation, such as violence or conflict (Biehal et al, 2003: 39).

Sadly, some missing people are found by police or other agencies only after they have died. Studies show that between 0.6% and 1% of all cases reported to the police end in a missing person being found dead (Tarling and Burrows, 2004, Newiss, 2006). In some cases, this is because they have been out of touch for a long time and have died of natural causes before contact was re-established. In other cases, this is because the missing person has become a victim of homicide, or has committed suicide, and may have been reported missing after their death, but before their body was discovered. Research suggests that the risk of being found dead is higher for adults than for young people, and the risk increases with age (Newiss, 2006).

References

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