

# MOLE HILLS FROM MOUNTAINS

LANCASHIRE CONSTABULARY, 2004

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**THE PROBLEM:** The Lancashire Police Constabulary has experienced a significant increase in the number missing person (missing person) cases in recent years. Approximately 9,000 cases investigated annually costs Lancashire police nearly £5.4m (\$8.6 million). National research suggested 20% reductions were possible for those missing persons categorized as “in care” (primarily children’s homes and mental health wards).

**ANALYSIS:** Early in the process, a computerised analysis of missing person data revealed that 41% of all reports involved repeat individuals, of which 81% were from children’s homes/hospitals. A few individuals were categorized as prolific repeat cases. In one case, a person was reported missing 90 times in 19 months.

**RESPONSE:** Research showed that missing persons were engaged in a variety of criminal activity, drug abuse and prostitution. The Lancashire County Council, private care companies and hospitals worked together to establish protocols to address various aspects of the problem. A police liaison officer was assigned to each care establishment and responsible for coordinating the responses of multi-agencies and reporting quarterly on their efforts.

It was decided that the project would be tested in Lancashire’s Southern Police Division. The remaining force was used as a control sample. An assessment of responses to this problem revealed the number of repeat missing person cases in southern division decreased as follows:

**ASSESSMENT:** Jul.-Sept. 2002 with Jul.-Sept. 2003: 19% reduction.  
Oct.-Dec. 2002 with Oct.-Dec. 2003: 68% reduction.  
Jan.-Mar. 2003 with Jan.-Mar. 2004: 68% reduction.

These reductions project an annual savings of £209,000 (\$355,000) for southern division and £1.8m (\$2.88 million) for the force. By focusing on individuals in care, significant reductions were achieved. This benefits the individual, the local community and reduces the consequential burden on police resources.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The Lancashire Constabulary commits significant resources to deal with the 9000 missing person reports it receives annually. Nearly 41% of missing persons are categorized as repeats. Operational officers often complained about the overwhelming demands on their time as a result of missing person cases. The high volume of cases reduced the time available for officers to address other crime and disorder problems in their communities.

Officers knew that many of the missing person cases involved young runaways from care homes and mental health patients from local psychiatric units. These individuals were known, while missing, to engage in crime (as victim or offender), substance abuse, disorder, anti social behaviour, prostitution and sexual exploitation. Repeat cases of missing persons involving the same individuals and/or the same care establishment were common but had not been analysed. Officers believed the problem was ripe for a Problem Oriented Policing (POP) approach.

## **SCANNING**

It was believed that repeat missing episodes, with the exposure it brings to risky and adverse activities, was a significant factor in the marginalisation and social exclusion of these already vulnerable individuals. This view was endorsed by local authority children's homes, private children's homes and psychiatric units, who police consulted about the nature and scale of the problem. This consultation also reaffirmed much of what was learned in scanning.

The majority of police forces operate a paper-based system for recording and investigating missing from home reports. Lancashire used a paper-based system until July 2002. The numbers of cases and illegible handwriting of officers made any meaningful analysis of the problem very difficult. Any analysis of missing persons cases was further complicated by the fact there was no central repository for missing person cases force-wide. Cases were filed at various stations around the force.

Nationally, other police forces face similar resource implications. Dealing with such cases involves much more than the police simply receiving, recording and circulating relevant information. As each case has the potential for a tragic outcome and closer about how it was handled, the majority of reports result in lengthy, detailed and expensive investigations.

In summary, scanning revealed the problem was as threefold: the community is deprived of the availability of police as a result of demands placed on them to investigate missing persons cases, missing persons engage in activities which have an adverse effect on community life, missing persons are vulnerable and become involved in a variety of crime, which by virtue of these activities, they become more marginalized and excluded from society.

Based on what was learned, an initial goal was established for 'Mole Hills From Mountains' "to reduce the incidence of missing persons with an emphasis on those who repeatedly go missing and with a particular emphasis on young people in care and mental

health patients.”

## ANALYSIS

Analysis sought to expand on what was learned in the scanning process. It began with an extensive literature review of academic, police and other agency sources on the subject. A working group was formed to identify good practice elsewhere at other police forces was also established.

A computerized program was developed by IT staff to capture data on missing from home and help investigators manage cases. A User Group was established consisting of representatives from each territorial division and relevant operational and support departments. This was done to ensure that the program was user-friendly and facilitated tasking and coordination with other police functional areas in the investigation of missing persons.

A newly revamped SARA model training package was rolled out to the entire force. This provided an opportunity to conduct detailed analysis of the problem which was simply not possible with the old paper based system. However, it took months for the system to acquire a bank of data before commencing the analysis. Existing incident log data was also analyzed. While limited, it did provide a valuable source of information corroborate or challenge emerging findings.

Two experienced and qualified analysts were commissioned at divisional and force levels to conduct independent ‘problem profiles’ as part of the analysis. The headline finding,

which confirmed and quantified an issue highlighted in the scanning process was that 41% of all Lancashire Missing Persons reported to the police were ‘repeat missing persons’ and 81% of these emanated from children’s care homes and psychiatric units. It appeared that these were the areas of the wider ‘missing from home’ problem most likely to yield to a POP approach.

The analysis identified several individual young people from care homes who were prolific repeat missing persons. One was reported missing 90 times in 19 months and another 78 times in 12 months. As a result, a new category of missing person - ‘repeat missing person’ was created for analysis. The computer system was adapted so it could specifically monitor and track these cases. With this accomplished, a basic model of performance management was beginning to emerge.

Improvements were made in the depth of analysis of factors such as age, gender, location, time, weekdays and months in which people go missing. Some interesting findings emerged. For example, a significant peak in mental health patient missing episodes occurred during summer months and an unexpected peak in children missing from care occurred during the autumn months. The information greatly assisted the department during the response phase. It also became clear that a ‘one size fits all’ approach to problem solving would not likely succeed, particularly at a tactical level.

A better understand of various “push” and “pull” factors associated with missing persons was also

accomplished. ‘Push’ factors may include bullying or abuse within a particular care establishment. ‘Pull’ factors may include the attraction to alcohol or substance misuse or criminality in the community. Pull factors may also include local addresses where young people are harboured in a permissive environment when missing.

Problem profiles conducted by analysts confirmed suspicions that a significant number of missing persons engage in crime, drugs, substance and alcohol abuse, anti social behaviour and sexual exploitation – thus, increasing their risk and vulnerability. For example, the data showed that in Lancashire, young people are 5 times more likely to have drug and alcohol related problems than their peers, a strong correlation exists between missing persons and domestic violence and family protection issues and a large number of teenage female runaways are sexually active and engage in acts of prostitution.

The analysis also revealed that the problem was simply being allowed to exist without any attempt at intervention. The root causes existed within the care establishments responsible to addressing the problems. These establishments were operated by agencies outside the police department and their staff did not view the problem as seriously as police. For example, if a person went missing staff just rang the police and waited for officers to return the missing person – sometimes hours or days later. The police bore the costs, responsibility and the risks of dealing with the problem. Staff and management of the establishments had little understanding

or appreciation of the burden place on police when investigating these cases or the dangers to the missing youth.

A lack of enthusiasm by agencies to address issues further aggravated the problem. The police struggled with problems largely created by other agencies reluctant to engage in resolutions. For example, there was no requirement or encouragement for local beat officers to work with care establishments. There was no organised attempt to introduce a POP approach. There was no strategic alliance with the organisations that operated care establishments. There were no multi-agency partnerships. Establishments were not held accountable for the number of missing persons reported from their location.

There were some successes that police drew encouragement. There was anecdotal evidence of occasional police led initiatives whereby individual motivated officers had targeted specific establishments and developed partnerships to reduce the problem. These individual led initiatives were very successful, albeit often short lived. Typically, the problem would re-emerge when the motivated officer moved on or became frustrated at the lack of any strategic framework, organisational support or recognition.

The emerging goal in handling this problem was to develop a system based upon our analysis which would produce sustainable reductions in repeat missing person cases with all the associated benefits of releasing police resources to concentrate on crime and disorder, reducing that element of crime and disorder which

was related to vulnerable people going missing from care and helping vulnerable individuals to fulfil their potential.

## **RESPONSE**

The POP process followed the National Intelligence Model. Analysis at the divisional level identified the many problems that emanated from missing person cases. These issues were highlighted at the Constabulary POP Steering Group. It was determined that partnerships with care establishments were key in addressing the missing person problem.

Since partners were not aware of the nature and extent of the problem, a meeting was held and they were provided computerized data about the problem. This formed a basis upon which all agencies could seek solutions. The southern division was selected as the target site for responses while the rest of the divisions on the force served as control groups. The police working group developed a strategic document with partners to prevent and manage missing person cases from the demand driving establishments - children's homes and mental health units.

Even at this early stage, gaining cooperation required that some leverage was applied. On one occasion, it took the involvement of a local Minister of Parliament (MP) to draw attention to the problem in a small town where police were overwhelmed with the number prolific repeat missing persons cases. These types of interventions resulted in the full cooperation of senior representatives

from some of the highest demand establishments.

Responses focused on the causative factors associated with repeat missing persons from children's homes. The following elements were considered when formulating responses: Information sharing between agencies, graded reporting which created a new category of missing person 'unauthorised absent' as opposed to 'missing', electronic reporting, shared ownership of the missing person enquiry between the police and the care agency, independent debriefing of the missing person following their return and programmed intervention by both agencies in respect of repeat missing persons.

A trained police liaison officer was appointed to each establishment. These officers were directed to employ a POP approach to their local problem. The officer's adopted protocols similar to Lancashire County Council protocol template. They assisted in raising awareness and in addressing missing person issues specific to their assigned establishment. Local responses included sanctions and reward regimes in children's homes, changes to a mental health ward fire escape mechanism, establishing a link between a hospital unit and town centre CCTV to assist the staff in recovering absent patients and use of the national care standards commission to provide leverage where difficulties existed with a particular children's home.

A multi-agency tasking and co-ordinating group (MAT&CG) met quarterly. It was attended by representatives from partner agencies,

including Lancashire County Council (social services department), ASG Care Services, Care Afloat (both private care organisations), the Lancashire Young Runaways Project Team (managed by The Children's Rights Service) Chorley and South Ribble NHS Trust, Southport and Ormskirk NHS Trust and Lancashire Connexions and the police liaison officers. At these meetings, divisional crime analysts provided a quarterly report on the nature and extent of missing individuals and tasks were assigned to various agencies to assist in resolving the problem. Where possible, the push and pull factors thought to contribute to the missing person problem were also identified and addressed. Partners were asked to report on their progress and successes at each meeting. The SARA model was utilized by all agencies involved to guide analysis and responses.

A Lancashire County Council representative worked with the police to develop missing person protocols. Consultations at all levels within social services and with the Lancashire Young Runaways Project occurred to ensure that proposals were realistic and achievable. The representative worked with the police department's Missing From Home Champion to deliver joint training to front line staff and oversee the implementation of responses by social services. Lancashire County Council revisited existing contracts with private care providers to ensure implementation involved all children in care, in Lancashire. Managers from other demand driving agencies (mental health wards and private care establishments) worked closely with the police liaison officers to develop subsidiary protocols and manage

implementation locally. Senior managers from partner agencies sit on the MA T&CG. They examine the crime analysts report in advance of the quarterly meetings.

The following police resources were used:

- Lancashire Constabulary Missing From Home Champion
- Southern Division Missing From Home Champion
- ICT Senior Analyst/Programmer
- Protocol Working Group (one Inspector, two Sergeants, one Constable)
- Two Divisional Analysts
- Southern Division Police Liaison Officers (two sergeants, three constables)

All personnel have a modest part time commitment within their existing police roles.

## **ASSESSMENT**

This project was evaluated by comparing repeat missing person cases in Southern Division between July 2002 and March 2003 and July 2003 and March 2004. During these time periods, Southern Division made significant reductions compared to the rest of the force. As noted previously, no accurate data was available prior to July 2002 due to the paper based recording system. The times of year have been kept consistent to allow for seasonal variations. The project was also assessed in terms of positive outcomes such as the quality of investigations.

**Numbers of Repeat Missing Person Cases:**

<b>Quarterly Comparison</b>	<b>Southern Division</b>	<b>Rest of Force</b>
July – September 2002	89	533
July – September 2003	72 (-19%)	622 (+17%)
October – December 2002	151	546
October – December 2003	49 (-68%)	491 (-10%)
January – March 2003	88	388
January – March 2004	28 (-68%)	542 (+40%)

When comparing July to September 2002 with July to September 2003, there was a 19% reduction in missing person reports in southern division and a 17% increase for the rest of force. During time period, protocols were being developed, liaison officers appointed and the MA T&CG initiated.

When comparing October to December 2002 with October to December 2003 there was a 68% reduction in southern division and a 10% decrease for the rest of force. During this time period, elements of the protocol were clearly beginning to take effect. POP training was delivered and the MA T&CG responded to its first quarterly report.

When comparing January to March 2003 with January to March 2004, there was a 68% reduction in southern division and 40% increase for the rest of force. During this time period, the overall strategies became established throughout southern division.

It was expected that reductions would

occur in southern division as the protocols and response strategies matured. As a result of the successes, the program will be rolled out force-wide during 2004. The new processes for handling missing person cases in southern division were incorporated in daily police practices at no extra costs. Based on an average cost of £880.00 (\$1,408) per missing person case, the total savings in southern division for a year was projected at £209,000 (\$334,000) and £1.8m (\$2.88 million) force-wide once fully implemented.

Previously, within Lancashire, local police led initiatives were undertaken sporadically and in isolation, with motivated officers working on their own. Due to the lack of any strategic framework, success was generally unsustainable and the problem returned when the individuals moved on.

This initiative shows that savings would not have been possible without a partnership approach within an established strategic framework. These results confirm that by tackling all targets identified in the analysis, significant results were obtainable. Had the project focused on individuals alone, the causative factors relating to establishments/partner organisations would have remained and any solutions with prolific individuals would have been short lived. Had the project focussed on the establishments/organisations, then considerable work would have had to be done with specific individuals resulting in unrealistic and resource intensive processes.

The reduction of missing persons incidents has positive outcomes for young people including a decrease in

the likelihood of social marginalisation. When missing, young people were putting themselves at risk of harm by simply being absent without any responsible person knowing their whereabouts. The incurred additional risks by responding to 'pull' factors like prostitution.

Follow-up work with social services shows that when missing incidents are reduced, young people realize an improved quality of life. For example, a young male in care who repeatedly went missing for long periods at a time was placing himself at risk by walking long distances to his home address. Bullying in the children's home caused the missing episodes. Once the underlying problem of bullying was addressed, the young man stopped leaving the facility and began attending school regularly. In another case, a young female was reported missing from a care facility on average 20 times per month due to the 'pull' of her boyfriend. Social workers focused their efforts on making arrangements for the girl to see her friends and boyfriend regularly. She no longer goes missing.

Carers have responded positively and welcome the enormous empowerment through decision making within their organisation and towards people in their care. In making fewer reports, they spend less time with missing enquiries and therefore more time with the young people in their care. Managers embrace the additional benefits of local police engagement.

Through this POP, a nationally recognised computerised missing person system has been developed and implemented, which has aided quality improvements to investigations.

It is difficult to quantify the activities of repeat missing persons from a crime and disorder perspective and associated costs to the police and the community. However, it is possible to illustrate this by displaying the incidence of offending over a period where missing behaviour was persistent. For example, one young person went missing repeatedly over a 12 month period. During that time, a sharp increase in offending (17 crimes over a 12 month period) was observed in the area he frequented. During this period he went missing 11 times. Prior to this period of time, he committed one offence and was missing on one occasion.

During the analysis phase, other published missing person reduction projects were examined and used to benchmark our successes. National research inferred that if solutions could be found then significant reductions in missing person reports were possible. One police force studied was able to accomplish a 20% reduction in missing persons. The results in southern division far exceeded other agencies the accomplishments of other agencies studied. The success of southern division's efforts can be attributed to the efforts of the Lancashire Police constabulary, its partners and the community.

## **FOR MORE INFORMATION**

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