



**Policing &
Reducing
Crime**

Police Research Series
Paper 114

**Missing presumed...?
The police response to
missing persons**

Geoff Newiss

Police Research Series
Paper 114

Missing presumed...? The police response to missing persons

Geoff Newiss

Editor: Barry Webb

Home Office

Policing and Reducing Crime Unit

Research, Development and Statistics Directorate

Clive House, Petty France

London, SW1H9HD



© Crown Copyright 1999
First Published 1999

Policing and Reducing Crime Unit: Police Research Series

The Policing and Reducing Crime Unit (PRC) was formed in 1998 as a result of the merger of the Police Research Group (PRG) and the Research and Statistics Directorate. PRC is now part of the Research, Development and Statistics Directorate of the Home Office. PRC carries out and commissions research in the social and management sciences on policing and crime reduction.

PRC has now combined PRG's two main series into the Police Research Series. The series will present research material on crime prevention and detection as well as police management and organisation issues.

Research commissioned by PRG will appear as a PRC publication.

ISBN 1-84082-306-2

Copies of this publication can be made available in formats accessible to the visually impaired on request.

Foreword

Investigating reports of missing persons is an every day activity for all police forces in the UK. However, it remains, sadly, a rather underrated and mostly low profile police function. Although the vast majority of persons reported as missing will return alive and well shortly after their disappearance, a small number will remain missing for an extended period of time. A tiny fraction of missing persons will be found to have been the victim of serious crime. Thus, the police have to respond effectively to all reports of missing persons in order to identify those individuals which may require a greater concentration of resources.

This report summarises the findings from research into the police investigation of missing persons. It comes at a time when many forces are recognising the need to review missing person policy and to have in place procedures to ensure the appropriate response to each disappearance. The research examines the common elements of the police response to the report of a missing person, and raises important strategic issues which need to be considered by all forces.

The report will be useful to both policymakers and practitioners who have to deliver an effective police response to this ever-present and increasingly important problem.

Dr Gloria Laycock

*Head of Policing and Reducing Crime Unit
Research, Development and Statistics Directorate
Home Office*

June 1999

Acknowledgements

The current work has been conducted as part of the PRC's Serious Crime Research Programme (SCRIP) based at the National Crime Faculty (NCF) at the Police Staff College, Bramshill. The SCRIP aims to develop advice to help the police improve policy and practice in the investigation of low volume serious crimes, such as stranger rape, murder and abduction. In its efforts to respond to the operational issues facing crime investigators, the SCRIP receives valued support and contributions from the staff of the NCF.

The author would like to thank all personnel who both facilitated and participated in the research. Interviews were conducted in the following forces: Cambridgeshire, Derbyshire, Devon & Cornwall, Gloucestershire, Greater Manchester Police, Leicestershire, Metropolitan Police Service, Thames Valley Police and West Yorkshire Police. I am grateful to the individuals in forty-six forces throughout the United Kingdom who completed and returned the original questionnaire upon which this research was based.

I would also like to thank Detective Chief Superintendent Mick Burdis (South Yorkshire Police), Andy Feist (PRC), Inspector Bruce Frencham (Metropolitan Police Service), Clive Marriot (Metropolitan Police Missing Persons Bureau), Dick Oldfield (PRC), and the staff of the National Missing Persons Helpline and the Police National Missing Persons Bureau for their assistance with the development of the project.

The Author

Geoff Newiss is a member of the Policing and Reducing Crime Unit.

PRC would like to thank Professor Mike Stein of the University of York for acting as independent assessor for this report.

Executive summary

Every day hundreds of people are reported as missing to the police. Surprisingly, little research has been conducted on how the police manage the important tasks involved in the handling of missing persons.

People from all walks of life go missing for any number of reasons. In the vast majority of cases they return to their normal surroundings soon after their disappearance with no significant harm having befallen them. However, a small percentage of missing persons will have been the victim of foul play or will have met with another tragic end (for example suicide or an accident). It is in the light of this possibility that the police must respond effectively to *all* reports of missing persons so as to identify those cases which require substantially more attention.

This report summarises the findings of research conducted in nine police forces. On the basis of interviews with key personnel and an examination of force missing person policies, the report outlines the main areas which need to be addressed by officers required to revise or prepare force policy. Examples of good practice are included. In particular, the report discusses the following key issues:

- **The initial response upon receipt of a missing person report.** Arrangements for the grading of calls in relation to missing persons were diverse. The skills, training and supervision of personnel undertaking this role were recognised to be critical to the effective prioritisation of reports.
- **Searching for missing persons.** A variety of searches are conducted when attempting to trace a missing person, ranging from an initial house search to the large scale inspection of surrounding areas. The type of search may require specialist units (both within the police and external bodies) to be deployed. It is suggested that an accurate record should be maintained of the timing, location and personnel involved in all places searched.
- **Classifying cases.** Reports of missing persons are classified in ways which has an impact upon the level of resources each case receives. The mechanisms for making these classifications range from formal criteria to the experience and judgement of officers involved. In particular, the effectiveness of 'vulnerability' as a criterion for distinguishing urgent from non-urgent cases is discussed.
- **Reviewing missing person investigations.** The research reveals the wide variation between forces in their arrangements for reviewing missing person cases.
- **Circulating the details of missing person reports.** The police use a number of mechanisms for circulating the details of missing people to both police and non-

police bodies. However, no national organisation currently holds a complete list of outstanding missing persons in the UK at any one time.

- **The end response upon finding a missing person.** Forces recognised the need to interview returned missing persons but most acknowledged the difficulties posed by repeat runaways from children's care homes. The need to adopt a formal cancellation policy is discussed.

A number of strategic issues are also examined. These are issues which arise at various stages throughout the police investigation of the report of a missing person and are crucial to the effectiveness of the police response. They are discussed under three broad headings:

- **Responsibility.** There is a need to ensure that the responsibility for dealing with missing persons is clearly identified. Forces may wish to consider the practice of implementing a 'second tier' of responsibility (usually in the shape of an overseeing unit).
- **Recording information.** Some forces are beginning to use information technology alongside missing person forms when recording the details of cases. Whatever the means of recording information, forces should ensure that all activity undertaken in response to the report of a missing person is thoroughly documented. This is imperative when a missing person is later found to have been murdered.
- **Inter-agency working .** Some types of missing persons (for example repeat runaways, young girls entering prostitution and some members of ethnic minorities) may be more effectively dealt with by the police working alongside other agencies, such as social services and charities.

The report provides the following recommendations:

- Forces should identify clear paths of responsibility for the handling of missing person reports. This should include identifying the specific duties of officers of different ranks, the exchange of cases between shifts and the role of different units involved with missing persons.
- Forces should think carefully about how they classify the report of a missing person, and the effect this may have upon the police response.

- Forces should consider developing expertise in the management, supervision and planning of searches specifically for missing persons (rather than objects).
- Each force should agree the necessary personnel, timing and terms of reference for the effective review of missing person reports. The inclusion of members of the criminal investigation department (CID) is recommended.
- Forces should consider the effectiveness of systems they have in place for recording missing person information.
- The progression of the police response to the report of a missing person should be recorded in a manner which ensures accountability. Actions, personnel, times, observations, decisions and policy should all be readily available if the enquiry become a more serious investigation.
- The recent review of the procedures for dealing with persons missing from care, *Missing From Care: Procedures and Practices in Caring For Missing Children* (LGA/ACPO, 1997), should be consulted by all forces.
- Procedures to identify suspicious missing persons are currently under-developed. The reliance on experience and professional judgement makes it particularly important that inexperienced officers receive the appropriate level of supervision and support.
- Future research should assess the reliability of traditional classification criteria in identifying those missing persons who are likely to be the victims of serious crime. Guidance needs to be developed to assist the police in identifying such cases early on.
- There is a need to review the sometimes overlapping role, scope and effectiveness of organisations which currently have a national function with respect to missing persons.

Contents

	Page
Foreword	(iii)
Acknowledgements	(iv)
Executive summary	(v)
List of figures	(ix)
List of tables	(ix)
1. Introduction	1
Purpose of the report	1
The research	2
2. The missing person problem	3
Factors influencing the volume of missing person reports	4
Who is reported missing	6
3. The police response to missing persons	9
Key considerations	9
Initial response	10
Searching	11
Classification	13
Review	16
Circulation	18
What happens when missing persons are found	20
4. Strategic issues	23
Responsibility	23
Recording	25
Inter-agency working	29
5. Conclusions and recommendations	34
References	36
Appendix 1	38
Recent publications in this series	40

List of figures

Figure No.	Caption	Page
1.	Factors affecting missing person 'workload'	5
2.	Sample of initial actions undertaken in response to the report of a missing person	11
3.	In-force practice: the use of search managers	13
4-	In-force practice: sharing information with the National Missing Persons Helpline	19
5.	In-force practice: using information technology	27
6.	In-force practice: information technology and accountability	29
7.	Categories of absence	30
8.	In-force practice: working with other agencies to tackle sexual exploitation	32
9.	In-force practice: helping missing persons from an ethnic minority	33

List of tables

Table No.	Caption	Page
1.	Number of missing person reports received by three police forces in 1997	3
2.	Reason for cancellation of missing person reports received by the Metropolitan Police Service 1997/8	4
3.	Proportion of persons reported missing aged 18 and under	4
4-	Number of 'vulnerable' missing persons traced in 1997/8	15

1. Introduction

This paper reports the findings of the first phase of a project examining the police response to the report of missing persons. Located within the Serious Crime Research Programme¹, a particular focus of the project is the police handling of suspicious missing persons (i.e. those individuals who may have been the victim of serious crime). This initial report deals with police policy and practice in relation to *all* missing persons. A subsequent report will focus specifically on the identification of suspicious missing persons and their effective investigation.

Purpose of the report

The report examines the mechanisms used by the police service to ensure a quick and effective response to the report of a missing person.

The principal objectives of the research were:

1. to produce a summary of the issues which should be considered by forces about to revise policy in relation to missing persons; and
2. to provide examples of good practice which may be drawn upon by forces seeking to improve their handling of missing persons.

The report does not provide the police with a definitive list of actions with which to investigate the disappearance of missing persons. Similarly, the report is not intended to be prescriptive about the content of missing person policy. Whilst the themes included were almost universally raised as issues of concern by the respondents, it is recognised that policy will be implemented alongside local practice and in response to particular localised problems.

Although the research encompasses the police response to all missing persons, a deliberate focus has been made (where applicable) on the identification and investigation of suspicious cases, in line with the overall objectives of the Serious Crime Research Programme.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of the missing person problem, demonstrating the heterogeneity of the missing person population. Chapter 3 outlines the key considerations faced by the police in dealing with missing persons and examines the standard elements of the police response upon receipt of a reported disappearance. The wider strategic issues that impact upon the police handling of missing persons are considered in Chapter 4- Reference is made to examples of force practice throughout the report.

¹ *The Serious Crime Research Programme was instigated by the Police Research Group (Home Office) in consultation with the Association of Chief Police Officers Crime Investigation Working Group in 1997. The research team are based within the National Crime Faculty at Bramshill Police Staff College, Hampshire. The overall objective of the Programme is to reduce the impact of serious crime in the United Kingdom (see Newiss, 1997, p24-25).*

INTRODUCTION

The research

Questionnaire survey

A short questionnaire was sent to an officer in each force who had a particular interest in missing persons. The questionnaire asked for the basic details of each force's policy and any local problems which may have contributed to the missing person workload. The questionnaire also asked respondents to identify potential examples of good or innovative practice which might form the basis of a follow-up visit. Questionnaires were sent to 50 forces² of which 46 replied, a response rate of 92%.

² All but two Home Office forces in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland were sent questionnaires. These were excluded after attempts to identify an individual to receive the questionnaire were unsuccessful.

Interviews

The completed questionnaires served two purposes. First, they allowed a basic analysis to be undertaken of the age and status of forces' missing person policies and the problems which impact upon police activity in this area. Secondly, they served as the basis for selecting a range of forces in which to conduct more detailed follow-up visits. This was based primarily upon the examples of good practice provided in the questionnaires, alongside the age and status of the force's policy and the demographic and geographic characteristics of each force area. As a result, ten forces were selected for more in-depth research. Of these, seven agreed to participate in 'full' visits consisting of semi-structured interviews with both policy makers and operational officers. These visits were used to examine the impact of good practice initiatives and to explore the practical implementation of force policy at operational level. A further two forces were visited purely to discuss and observe examples of good practice. Unfortunately, one force was unable to participate in the field visits owing to pressing operational commitments.

2. The missing person problem

Numerous studies have shown that a significant number of people go missing each year. Many of these reports have concentrated solely on young 'runaways' (usually defined as those under the age of 18). For example, Newman (1989) estimated that there were 98,000 incidents of young people running away each year. Abrahams and Mungall (1992) estimated that 43,000 young people ran away in England and Scotland in 1990, producing a total of 102,000 incidents being reported to the police.

This volume of reports poses a serious problem to the police service. A typical police force can expect to respond to, at the very least, one new missing person report every day. Table 1 demonstrates the number of persons reported missing in the year 1997 in three forces of different size and composition. Dealing with such large numbers of reports occupies considerable police time.³

³ *The Community Affairs Department in Stockton, Cleveland Constabulary, suggest that each report takes approximately five hours in police time, excluding investigation (see Tillpy 1997 p 15).*

Table 1: Number of missing person reports received by three police forces in 1997

Force	Number of reports of missing persons received	Annual reports per 1,000 of the resident population	Average number of reports received per day
Cambridgeshire	1,750 (a)	2.5	4.8
Greater Manchester	10,969 (b)	4.3	30.1
Metropolitan	32,314 (c)	4.3	88.5

- (a) Refers to the number of reports recorded on the Crime Information System.
- (b) This is an underestimate. The figure excludes those missing persons that were cancelled before circulation (for the first six months of 1997 only).
- (c) Relates to cases reported during the financial year 1997/1998.

The police are faced with the difficult task of having to process all missing person cases to identify those that require a more urgent and intensive response. In the majority of cases the individual will return of their own accord having suffered no significant harm. Data collected by the Metropolitan Police Missing Persons Bureau show that of the 32,314 reports received in the financial year 1997/8, only 343 (1.1%) were still outstanding at the beginning of April, 1998 (see Table 2). Of those reports that were cancelled only 102 (0.3% of the total) were done so because the missing person was discovered dead.⁴

⁴ *The assumption is made that of the 12,378 cases cancelled without a recorded reason, the vast majority will have returned or otherwise been located. If the missing person was discovered dead it would be expected that this would be formally documented as the reason for cancellation.*

THE MISSING PERSON PROBLEM

Reason for cancellation / unsolved	Number	Column percentage
None stated / recorded	12,378	38.3
Returned of own accord	11,978	37.1
Located / returned by police	5,598	17.3
Other reasons	1,405	4.3
Arrested	510	1.6
Unsolved	343	1.1
Found dead	102	0.3
Total	32,314	100.0

Source: Metropolitan Police Missing Persons Bureau

A large proportion of reports relate to missing children who may be considered particularly vulnerable. Table 3 demonstrates the proportions of persons reported as missing who are aged 18 or under for two forces. Data supplied by the Metropolitan Police Service indicate that almost twenty per cent of missing person reports relate to young people under 14 years old. These cases, and the consequent actions of the police, may attract considerable media attention.

Force	Total number reported missing	% of total aged 18 and under	% of total aged under 14
Greater Manchester	6,937 (a)	78.0	..
Metropolitan	32,314 (b)	67.3	19.0

- (a) Figures relate to the first six months of 1998 and include those persons reported as missing, those cancelled before circulation and those listed as absconders.
 (b) This figure relates to cases reported during the financial year 1997/1998.
 (.. = not available)

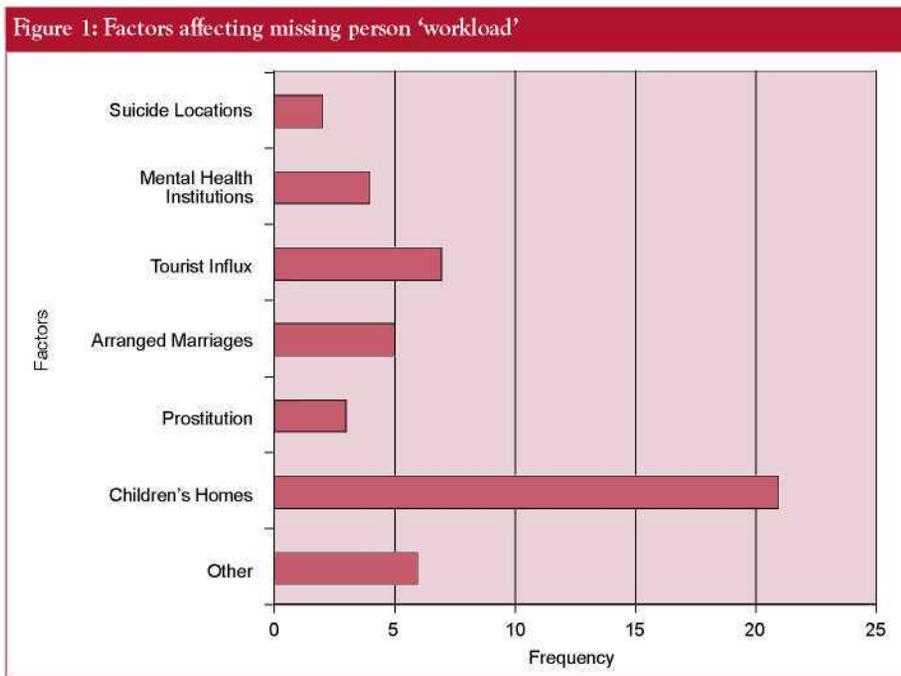
Factors influencing the volume of missing person reports

The reasons why people go missing are diverse. The breakdown of family and social relationships, personal motivation, institutional shortcomings and the involvement of another individual are just some of the circumstances which may lead to a person being reported as missing. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that many

THE MISSING PERSON PROBLEM

missing person reports received by the police can arise from a small number of local factors or problems. The questionnaire attempted to collate some basic information on these problems.

Forces were asked to identify any specific problems or local issues which influenced the number of missing person reports they have to deal with. Figure 1 suggests there are some common problems. Most notably, the high incidence of persons reported missing from children's homes, often the source of repeat runaways, was identified as a significant cause of reports to the police. This is supported by recent study of 11-16 year olds in children's homes in four authorities which found that just over 43% of the children had been reported missing at least once throughout the year (Wade *ex al*, 1998).



Note: Respondents were invited to highlight as many factors as appropriate to their force, hence many gave multiple responses. Eighteen respondents stated that their forces had no such problems or issues. Within the 'other' category the following factors were identified: lack of police resources; the attraction of missing persons to London; the employment of immigrants / maids; children missing for short periods of time (especially on local beaches); domestic and drug related issues; and missing students.

THE MISSING PERSON PROBLEM

Who is reported missing

The police have to respond to reports of missing persons from all walks of life. Not only are the characteristics of missing persons diverse, so too are the manner in which they are reported as missing. In some cases friends and/or relatives will be genuinely concerned for the health and safety of an individual. In other instances a person may be reported missing as a consequence of a legal requirement for their whereabouts to be assured; this is often the case for young people reported missing from children's homes. The policies examined during the course of this research highlighted how the actions taken by the police will depend upon the perceived *type* of missing person they are dealing with.

The final part of this chapter will examine two types of missing person which are of concern to all forces. The problems with the handling of repeat runaways, in particular those from children's homes, are common to all forces. These disappearances are usually of a short duration, although their sheer volume occupies considerable police resources. Secondly, the problem of identifying *suspicious* missing persons is discussed. Although the likelihood of a missing person being the victim of serious crime is fortunately low (no exact figures are available at present on the rate of this type of disappearance), the police have to bear this eventuality in mind for *all* missing persons.

Repeat runaways

Previous research has demonstrated that a minority of missing persons can account for the majority of incidents reported to the police; these are usually referred to as 'repeat runaways'⁵. In a study of the reports of young runaways, Abrahams and Mungall (1992) found that 35% of these persons were responsible for 73% of the disappearances recorded. Repeat runaways were most likely to be residents of local authority care homes. More recent research has indicated that a significant proportion of young runaways first go missing from the family home, suggesting that the causes for this behaviour may be located within the family rather than simply within the local authority residence (Stein, Biehal & Wade, 1997).

The difficulties repeat runaways present to the police were acknowledged in the final report of the Review of Police Core and Ancillary Tasks (Home Office, 1995a). The Appendices to the report confirmed that:

The police experience a particular problem when dealing with reports of 'missing' persons when previous experience leads them to believe this is only a temporary absence (Home Office, 1995b,p10)

⁵ *The term 'runaways' is used to suggest that the disappearance is a voluntary act of the individual. However, this in no way detracts from the fundamental problem of distinguishing those missing persons who are indeed 'runaways' and those whose disappearance is of an involuntary nature.*

THE MISSING PERSON PROBLEM

The tendency of care homes to report any individual as missing who has not returned by a specified time can impose a significant drain on police resources. This problem (one force referred to it as 'quick calling') was acknowledged in every force visited. Respondents were keen to point out that in most instances carers reported persons as missing in order to 'cover their backs'. Many officers saw this as a dereliction of responsibility (carers were described as 'passing the buck' to the police).

Clear feelings of frustration were voiced by many police officers in relation to the handling of repeat missing persons, especially those from local authority care homes. The most frequently expressed concerns were that:

- *they aren't really vulnerable;*
- *they're more likely to be the perpetrators rather than the victims of crime;*
- *what can we do with them if and when we find them?; and*
- *if we return them 'home' they'll be gone again before we get back to the station.*

Many officers indicated that police relations with these individuals were often poor and regarded responding to repeat missing persons as a thankless and pointless task.

The temptation for the police to view the report of a missing person as simply an administrative exercise (i.e. a matter of filling the form in rather than genuine police enquiry) would appear to be significantly increased when responding to repeat runaways. This is exemplified by the practice of stations leaving missing person forms with care staff to be faxed back to the police in the event of such an individual going missing (this practice was common to six of the forces visited). All forces had either adopted specific policy to deal with repeat runaways or had developed localised practice, which may not have strictly adhered to the policy, to manage the situation.

Four forces admitted that the police response to the report of a repeat missing person would be delayed, and one had developed specific policy to allow this. Repeat runaways were defined as any individual that had been reported missing four times in one month or on six occasions in two months. The report of any individuals meeting this criteria had to be taken within 6 hours, and the circulation of their details could be delayed until the morning (most repeat runaways were reported missing during the night). A 'locate / trace' entry on the Police National Computer (PNC) was used to ensure that officers who may have come into contact with the runaway before circulation was undertaken were aware of their situation. Three other forces had unofficial delays; one suggested that a delay of 24 hours would not be uncommon before the report of a repeat runaway would be taken seriously.

THE MISSING PERSON PROBLEM

Suspicious missing persons

Of all the individuals who go missing each year, only a very small minority will have been the victims of serious crime. A proportion of these will be homicide cases where no body has been located; others may have become a victim after disappearing of their own accord. The abduction of individuals for whatever purpose may also result in missing person reports.

The police need to have mechanisms in place to try to distinguish non-suspicious missing persons from those believed to have been the victims of serious crime. Respondents in all forces stated that, on the whole, the experience, discretion and judgement of officers was vital to the recognition of suspicious cases. It was often suggested that some officers had a 'gut-feeling' for this type of missing person. Importantly, anecdotal evidence suggests that many suspicious missing persons are not those who would necessarily be considered *vulnerable*.

The identification of those missing persons who have fallen victim to serious crime is vital to the maintenance of a positive police image. In cases where the police have delayed their response to a missing person (who has later been discovered to have been the victim of a serious offender) the media have been quick to accuse the police of inaction and ineffectiveness.

3. The police response to missing persons

The report of a missing person is dissimilar to many of the incidents to which the police respond. Unlike the report of a burglary, a rape, or a homicide, there may be no obvious signs of a crime having taken place. Indeed, this will in fact turn out to be the case in the vast majority of reports, with the missing persons either returning soon after their disappearance or having been established as missing of their own free will.

This is, therefore, a very uncertain situation for the police, and they need to undertake enough actions and enquiries to satisfy themselves that no harm has befallen the missing person. The outcomes of these actions and enquiries may lead them to conclude that the report should receive the attention of other police units such as the criminal investigation department (CID)⁶, the child protection unit or the community affairs department.

The potential complexity and dynamism of a missing person report has important ramifications for force policy in this area. Policy has to direct the actions of the police in such a manner that they will be able to manage the vast number of reports received whilst responding quickly and effectively to those reports which may give rise to concern for the welfare of the missing person. Whilst most forces have a formalised missing person policy (89%, n=41, of the questionnaire respondents stated their force had a written policy), a substantial proportion were prepared before 1995 (35%), and over half of the respondents suggested that force policy was to be revised in the near future or was currently under revision.

⁶ The term CID is used throughout the report. This should be read to include alternative departmental names such as the crime management unit.

Key considerations

When responding to the report of a missing person it is evident that the police are faced with a number of key considerations. In particular, the police must consider the:

- well-being of the missing person;
- respect for the right of an individual to go missing;
- compassionate treatment of the relatives and friends of the missing person;
- likelihood that the person missing may have been the victim of serious crime;
- preservation and management of evidence in suspicious cases; and
- appropriate level of resources for each individual report.

One of the critical problems in dealing with most reports is that these concerns are, in some instances, seemingly contradictory. The right of an individual to go missing has to be balanced with the need to treat his / her relatives and friends compassionately (this may cause particular ethical difficulties when the police

THE POLICE RESPONSE TO MISSING PERSONS

acquire knowledge of the whereabouts of a missing person who does not wish this information to be passed to his / her family). Similarly, if the person making the report is suspected of having an unlawful involvement in the disappearance, then the police will have to balance the need to act compassionately with the requirement to obtain and preserve evidence.

This chapter will examine the common tasks performed by the police once a report of a missing person comes to their attention. In doing so, the report will highlight examples of force practice, and will outline the issues within each stage which should be considered by those developing force policy in the area. The report does not intend to imply a chronological order to these tasks; in many cases they will be undertaken simultaneously.

Initial response

Call grading

In most forces it is the staff in force or area control rooms who have the responsibility to deploy a police patrol to take the report of a missing person (in some instances a report may be delivered face to face at the front desk of the police station or by stopping a duty officer on patrol). These predominantly civilian staff will make an initial decision to initiate an immediate or deferred response, inform the duty divisional or area supervisor, and in some forces will direct patrol officers to perform specific tasks (e.g. to search the house and immediate area).⁷

⁷ For a more detailed examination of the role of control room staff see Diez, 1995.

Several forces commented that the level of training received by communications staff may not be sufficient to enable them to make an accurate assessment of the priority of a call relating to a missing person. Furthermore, there is no standard guidance for call takers on the information required from the person reporting a disappearance to assist the prioritisation of the call and, where necessary, the subsequent investigation. Indeed one respondent suggested that the pressure for control room staff to take calls within a given time period may inhibit the collection of relevant, initial information by encouraging call takers to be as brief as possible.

Initial actions

The report of a missing person will invariably be responded to, in the first instance, by 'the next available uniform patrol'. All respondents suggested that the experience and expertise of officers receiving the report will vary, as with the handling of any other incident. Less experienced officers are likely to be more dependent upon the attention and instruction of their supervising officers when

THE POLICE RESPONSE TO MISSING PERSONS

deciding the appropriate reaction to the report of a missing person. In order to clarify the responsibilities of officers' receiving these reports, and to ensure a degree of consistency between cases, all forces had developed at least a basic list of initial actions to be conducted (a selection of these actions are included in Figure 2). These were sometimes included on the missing person form as an *aide memok*.

Figure 2: Sample of initial actions undertaken in response to the report of a missing person

Although no two forces had produced exactly the same list of initial actions, a core number of tasks to be completed did emerge from the research. Although by no means exhaustive, the following actions were commonly recommended:

- question the informant about the nature of the disappearance and the person missing;
- obtain a recent photograph;
- obtain a list of associates, friends and frequented places to assist with future enquiries;
- conduct a thorough search of the missing person's normal place of residence and other appropriate locations;
- make an initial assessment of the potential harm that may befall the missing person (and bring this to the attention of a supervisor);
- assess the possibility of foul play (and bring to the attention of a supervisor);
- check if the person reported missing is in custody (to avoid embarrassment);
- begin a missing person form giving details of the person missing and actions taken;
- conduct a check of relevant police indexes and intelligence systems (domestic violence; child protection and community safety indexes may be particularly instructive) for evidence of the missing person being 'at risk' from familial abuse or violence;
- conduct a check of relevant non-police indexes, in particular the local Social Services 'At Risk' register;
- conduct a check of force crime recording systems for information that the missing person may be an offender, a vulnerable witness or a victim of crime;
- check missing person index for previous incidents of the same nature;
- check local hospitals as a possible locus of the missing person; and
- circulate the description of the missing person to police patrols (and consider wider PNC circulation).

Searching

Initial search

Respondents from all forces agreed that the need to undertake a thorough search of the missing person's residence and immediate area was particularly important. Many officers were able to recall incidents of protracted investigations being undertaken

THE POLICE RESPONSE TO MISSING PERSONS

which resulted in the missing person (usually a child) being found hiding in the attic or shed of the family home. It is clearly appropriate for these preliminary searches to be undertaken soon after the report of a missing individual has been taken.

One respondent suggested that the task of searching the residence of a missing person should be mandated in force policy. Officers would therefore be compelled to undertake this task even if the person reporting the disappearance was reluctant for it to take place. This may prove particularly valuable when foul play has not been ruled out, and evidence may still be present within the family home (an obvious example being the presence of blood in the house). A search may also reveal other indications as to the likely whereabouts or state of mind of the missing person. Inferences may be drawn from evidence that the missing person has prepared to leave or, alternatively, a lack of preparation may indicate that foul play should not be ruled out.

Consideration should also be made of the need to search the homes of relatives, friends and acquaintances of the missing person, particularly those seen with him or her close to the time of the disappearance. Findings from the CATCHEM database (Derbyshire Constabulary) indicate that in 76% of all child homicides⁸ the offender was known to the victim, and that 26% of victims are found in the home of the offender.

⁸ *The CATCHEM database contains the records of 3,187 victims of homicide (of females aged under 21 and males aged under 17 at the time of death) from 1960 to date. For more details see Aitken et al (1995).*

Protracted investigations

The report of a vulnerable (or other 'high-concern' category) missing person often results in the initiation of further, resource intensive searches if the individual is not found quickly. All forces had a number of internal resources available for this type of exercise including specialist police search units, Police Search Advisors (POLSAs) and, in the case of Leicestershire Constabulary, a Search Manager (see Figure 3). All forces noted that the planning, supervision and management of search teams should be undertaken in consultation with the search advisor, in order to ensure an efficient and effective use of resources. The issue of effective searching was raised by a number of respondents, anxious that their force was not to be the subject of criticism for not finding a body in an area which had previously been searched. Several cases have highlighted the need to identify clear and appropriate areas of responsibility when a search needs to be conducted on the border of two neighbouring forces. Respondents in one force were keen to stress the importance of keeping an accurate record of the method, parameters and personnel involved in a search, in the event of the enquiry developing into a more serious investigation⁹.

⁹ *One method employed by National Crime Faculty detectives to enhance the recording of search activities is the use of a 'search grid'. This requires a map of the area being searched to be overlaid with a square grid. In each square the name of the officers (or other resource) performing the search, the date and the techniques employed (e.g. POLSA search, line search, dogs, etc.) are inserted. Subsequent searches in the same area are added to the grid noting the appropriate details.*

Police forces should also be aware of the external resources which may be able to assist with searches. An appeal to the general public can often ensure a sizeable

THE POLICE RESPONSE TO MISSING PERSONS

number of participants in search exercises (although the police need to think carefully about what role volunteers will take in the search). The Army and Mountain Rescue groups have previously assisted police search operations, and in some instances are better equipped than the police to search remote and physically challenging areas. Other agencies which may be in a position to assist the police include water utilities, refuse agencies and street cleaning enterprises. Forces should consider introducing appropriate procedures in order to secure the early co-operation of these bodies should their assistance be desirable.

Figure 3: In-force practice: the use of search managers

At the time of the visit, Leicestershire Constabulary had sent seven officers on a course in search management techniques run by the Emergency Response Institute at the University College of North Wales, Bangor. The force has a pool of search managers to assist duty officers requiring an extended or systematic search for a missing person. Search managers specialise in searching for people rather than objects (the search of the latter is the primary function of the POLSA), particularly those who are vulnerable to self-harm or the natural elements (the young, elderly, mentally unstable and those likely to commit suicide). Unfortunately, search managers can be of only limited assistance in cases where the missing person does not wish to be found.

Search managers provide guidance on the parameters of a search, taking account of the terrain and specific circumstances, and the techniques appropriate to each search (for example, whether to use officers, dogs, helicopters, etc.) They prioritise those places in the area where a missing person is most likely to be found.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that using search managers in the correct circumstances can avoid wasting police resources on fruitless searches.

Classification

Throughout the handling of a missing person enquiry, it is commonplace for officers to accord a missing person a classification. The most popular type of classification used by forces is the perceived *vulnerability* of the individual concerned. This was employed in five out of the seven forces visited. One force classified cases according to the risk each missing person may be exposed to. Another force operated no system of classifying reports. The main purpose of classifying missing persons was to distinguish those cases requiring an increased police response. Three forces specifically outlined a different police response for vulnerable and non-vulnerable missing persons in their force policy. In the case of the latter, the report could expect to receive delayed circulation, less formal monitoring and review, limited enquiries at the discretion of the supervisor and a slower involvement of CID. All three forces

¹⁰ In part this reflects Home Office requirements for forces to send missing person reports to the Police National Missing Persons Bureau on the basis of their vulnerability (Home Office Circular 12/1994) — see Appendix I.

THE POLICE RESPONSE TO MISSING PERSONS

provided the opportunity for a classification to be changed should new information come to the attention of the police.

How are reports classified?

Forces utilised a range of *methods* by which police officers could make classifications. All force policies made some reference to the vulnerability criteria laid down in the Home Office Circular (12/1994 - see Appendix 1) for the circulation of reports to the Police National Missing Persons Bureau. However, a number of officers expressed their reservations about the effectiveness of the criteria.

Some officers suggested it was rare for the Home Office vulnerability criteria to form the basis for a decision on the urgency of a case. Some officers suggested that a matrix of factors which would indicate a report to be worthy of closer inspection would be helpful to the police. The force using a risk classification had produced a short statement of the type of circumstances which would indicate a missing person to be deemed high or low risk. Above all else, respondents in all forces stressed the importance of professional judgement and supervision when making any classification of a missing person. A detective chief inspector in one force was clear that the criteria of vulnerability alone could not ensure the correct classification of all missing persons, commenting '*supervisors need to accept their responsibility.*'

Reservations about the use of criteria had led one force (and at least one other outside the sample in this study) to abandon attempts to classify missing persons, in favour of a system of decision-making and action allocation based on the merits of each case. The officers interviewed in this force stressed that the new approach would return the onus of responsibility on to the officer receiving the report and his / her supervisors. Importantly, they suggested that a system of non-classification would move the handling of missing persons away from being an 'administrative' task to one which necessitated the use of professional skills and effective line management. They were particularly concerned that check-list style criteria were being used within the force as an excuse for inaction.

Other officers were less dismissive about the role of classification in general and specifically the use of 'aids' to make such classifications. Several commented that vulnerability criteria and matrices of risk were a good reference point, particularly for inexperienced officers.

Vulnerability

The term 'vulnerable' has been used to describe a whole range of individuals who are considered by various agencies to be missing in circumstances which might be

THE POLICE RESPONSE TO MISSING PERSONS

detrimental to their well-being. The young, aged, mentally infirm, drug-dependent and long-term missing have all been identified as vulnerable by different organisations. Although the classification of missing persons according to their vulnerability is common practice in UK police forces, it is by no means unproblematic. Classifying missing persons as vulnerable (usually on the basis of the Home Office criteria) rarely gives a clear indication of the specific risk faced by an individual or the basis for police concern. The vagueness of the term frequently results in the vast majority of missing persons being classified as vulnerable, although in some cases this may be done simply to safeguard against criticism in the event of a missing person case becoming a serious crime investigation.

The majority of 'vulnerable' missing persons do not meet with tragic consequences. The Police National Missing Persons Bureau (PNMPB) collects vulnerable missing person reports (see Appendix 1) which are still outstanding after 14 days. Of the 2,197 missing persons entered onto their database in 1997/8, 1,561 (71.0%) had been traced by the end of the year (see Table 4).¹¹ Only 938 reports related to missing persons under the age of 18, of which 692 (73.8%) had been traced by the end of the year.

¹¹ *The number of missing persons traced would doubtless be higher if the figures were calculated some time after the end of the financial year. Those persons reported as missing towards the end of the time period will have had comparatively little chance to return before these figures were produced.*

Table 4: Number of 'vulnerable' missing persons traced in 1997/8

Categories	Reported to PNMPB	Traced	
		Number	Percentage
Persons aged 18 and under	938	692	73.8
Persons aged over 18	1,259	869	69.0
Total	2,197	1,561	71.0

Source: Police National Missing Persons Bureau

In fact, labelling a missing person as 'vulnerable' says little about the nature of the risks faced by the particular individual. A missing person may be vulnerable to at least four specific risks:

- the natural elements;
- an accident;
- suicide or self harm; and
- serious crime.

Children, the elderly, drug addicts and mental health patients can be vulnerable to each of the risks identified above. Therefore this kind of classification is not, on its

THE POLICE RESPONSE TO MISSING PERSONS

own, sufficient to determine the most appropriate police response. It is recommended that future research should focus on whether and how the specific risks faced by a missing person can be predicted from a combination of their individual characteristics, and other factors such as the person reporting them missing and the circumstances of the disappearance. This would enable the police to respond more effectively to different types of missing person.

Review

It is imperative that the police have in place procedures to overlook the progress of an enquiry. Quite apart from daily supervision, there is a need to take a holistic look at the report and the police response to it at regular intervals.

The research revealed a wide variation between forces in the procedures for reviewing missing person cases. Indeed, no two forces were the same in this respect. An important distinction is that between day-to-day supervision and a formal review. All forces indicated that *supervision!* a missing person enquiry should occur on a daily basis (probably during each new duty shift). However, supervision primarily relates to the quality and choice of actions being undertaken within the duty shift - that is to say, the day-to-day management of the enquiry. Although not unimportant, this should not be confused with the more far-reaching, strategic examination of the enquiry conducted within a review. Forces should consider the timing of reviews, the appropriate personnel to conduct them and the objectives of performing a review.

Timing

Previous research has indicated that most missing person 'episodes' are for a relatively short duration (usually between one to two days). Abrahams and Mungall's (1992) study of young runaways (those under 18 years old who went missing from either home or local authority care) revealed that 62% had returned within 24 hours, rising to 77% within 48 hours. Only two percent of runaways were absent for more than 14 days. Recent research by Wade *et al* (1998) would suggest that the duration for which children go missing from children's homes is, on average, slightly less than the general population of young runaways (84% were missing for one day or less).

The forces visited in this study began the first formal review of missing person cases between the first and seventh day of the police response (five out of the seven were initiated within 72 hours). One force operated a daily 'review' of the inquiry (this is perhaps better understood as supervision) and a weekly review of the whole file (hence, the first formal review began on day seven). Long-term missing persons

THE POLICE RESPONSE TO MISSING PERSONS

were commonly reviewed every 3 months and / or annually, having been previously accorded the status of 'enquiries exhausted', 'filed' or 'inactive'.

Although the formal review of a missing person enquiry may not begin until after the first 24 hours, the police need to be vigilant for the possibility that foul play may be behind a disappearance. If there is concern for the welfare of the person missing then arrangements should be in place to 'raise the priority of a case' before a formal review is initiated.

Personnel

The personnel employed to review missing person cases varied from force to force and with the timing of the review. The first review was undertaken by an officer of the rank of inspector or chief inspector in all forces. In two forces these officers were detectives. Future reviews were opened to a wider audience; in one force this extended to the divisional commander and members of the CID.

If forces accept that one of the main purposes of conducting a review is to establish the possibility of foul play having been the cause of the disappearance, then particular consideration should be given to the inclusion of a member of the CID on the review team. Reviewing officers may also wish to consult with other force units who may have information relevant to the disappearance of the missing person, if this hasn't already taken place. Intelligence units, domestic violence teams, child protection teams and community liaison officers may all be able to contribute to an effective investigation of a missing person case.

Objectives

Finally, forces may wish to consider identifying the specific objectives of performing a review. These may include:

- checking the classification (if appropriate) of the case;
- deciding if detective input is required;
- deciding what further actions may be taken by the duty shift teams;
- providing a quality assurance check on the enquiry so far;
- considering the relevance of other incidents in the area / force / further afield;
and
- considering the status of the report (is the case still 'live', or 'enquiries exhausted — long term missing' etc.).

THE POLICE RESPONSE TO MISSING PERSONS

Circulation

In many cases, part of the police response to the report of a missing person will be to share the information they have collected with a number of police and other agencies. Procedures to facilitate the circulation of missing person information were present in all forces visited.

The circulation of missing person details to other forces via the PNC was mandated in all forces. Some distinguished between cases involving *vulnerable or high risk* missing persons, in which case the circulation was instigated within the first few hours of a report being received (in one force this was undertaken 'immediately', in another 'within 4 hours'). The circulation of *non-vulnerable persons* was less prescribed. One force left the circulation of non-vulnerable persons to the discretion of supervising officers. Another suggested that circulation should occur when officers were satisfied that the person was missing. Other forces gave approximate timings of when circulation should be made for all cases, but qualified the action by giving the power to delay circulation to senior area / divisional officers. Delays in circulation were particularly common when dealing with repeat missing persons from local authority accommodation.

Many forces had identified an individual or department within the force to deal with circulations to the PNMPB (see Appendix 1). This function was often undertaken by the force PNC Bureau whose staff would automatically pass on the details of a missing person after the mandatory 28 days (since the research was undertaken this has been reduced to 14 days). The circulation of reports to the PNMPB was regarded by most as an administrative exercise. Only one officer was aware of an occasion where the PNMPB had provided assistance to the police in tracing a missing person (in this instance the PNMPB had checked their database against the details of an unidentified body).

Circulation to non-police bodies was less consistent. The National Missing Persons Helpline (NMPH - for more details see Appendix 1) was regarded by almost all respondents to be a useful resource in the search for missing persons. As well as assisting with publicity for missing persons and checking reports against a database of unidentified bodies, the NMPH undertakes a valuable support role for the friends and family of the person missing. One respondent was particularly concerned that issues of data protection may preclude the exchange of information to external bodies. Other respondents were content that, with the permission of the person reporting the disappearance, information could be shared with other appropriate agencies involved in locating missing persons.

Figure 4: In-force practice: sharing information with the National Missing Persons Helpline

Gloucestershire Police have recently begun an initiative to acquire the details of as many persons as possible regarded as missing within their force area. This project has resulted from the growing concern that a proportion of missing persons are never reported to the police, for a variety of reasons. Whilst the police may be able to offer only limited practical assistance in some cases (i.e. those deemed not to be vulnerable) the benefits of acquiring a more complete list of disappearances may be substantial. In particular, the analysis of full missing person data can enhance the force's ability to identify patterns of potential crime, and can assist with the identification of unidentified bodies.

A joint protocol has been developed between Gloucestershire Police and the NMPH to share information on missing persons relevant to the force area. A database has been designed to record the basic details of all persons reported as missing whether vulnerable or non-vulnerable (using the definition given in the Home Office Circular 12/1994). The database electronically transfers the details of all reports to the NMPH, and electronically receives the details of missing persons reported directly to the NMPH who are missing from Gloucestershire. Although the police action upon receipt of new records will be limited to those classified as vulnerable, a complete set of data will be held by both agencies.

The collection of missing person details at a national level has proved to be a difficult issue to resolve. Neither the PNMPB or the NMPH currently hold a complete database of *all* outstanding missing persons. The European Union have considered this problem since as far back as 1971. In 1979 it was recommended that all member countries establish national offices for the exchange of information pertaining to the search for missing persons at both a national and international level (Council of Europe, Recommendation No.R (79) 6). More recently, the European Union has examined how these 'national co-ordination points' should function. In a note from the Presidency of the European Union to the Police Co-operation Working Group (Technology) (February, 1997) the duties of the co-ordination points were defined as the:

1. collection and storage of relevant data;
2. analysis based on those data;
3. data exchange with central points in other countries; and
- 4- co-ordination regarding information and training on handling missing persons.

A review of how agencies in the United Kingdom currently fulfil these tasks would be timely.

THE POLICE RESPONSE TO MISSING PERSONS

What happens when missing persons are found

The police have only very limited powers to do anything with located missing persons (this in part explains the frustration of many officers involved in missing person cases). When an adult is found who is not the subject of any compulsory detention orders, the police can only attempt to obtain information which may be passed to the individual making the missing person report (with the permission of the missing person). This may be as little as confirming that s/he has been seen and does not wish their location to be identified.

Only in circumstances when a minor is located by the police can any legal powers be used. If the missing person is considered vulnerable the police are likely to encourage the individual to return home or to make contact with some other organisation which may be able to offer assistance. Only in situations of alleged abuse is a parent likely to be kept ignorant of a missing person's whereabouts (this may also occur when missing persons fear retribution from family members). For the majority of cases all the police can do is try to gain information about the disappearance and finalise their records.

Interviewing

All forces acknowledged that sometimes, despite what is laid out in force policy, not all missing persons are interviewed. Particular difficulties were experienced in dealing with the return of repeat runaways (the police response to this type of missing person is examined in more detail in the next chapter). All forces acknowledged that sending an officer to speak to these individuals was a significant drain on resources and was often a fruitless task. Repeat runaways from local authority care were variously described as '*unco-operative*,' '*difficult*,' '*unresponsive*,' and '*aware of their legal rights not to speak to the police*.'

An officer in one force was adamant that the police responsibility to identify the causes of a disappearance (the so-called 'welfare interview') had to be limited. He suggested that not only were staff of the care homes in a better position to talk to and build relationships with their residents, but that they also had a statutory duty to safeguard the welfare of children (The Children Act, 1989). In response to the recommendations of the Beck Inquiry (Kirkwood, 1993) - which stated that all returned missing persons should be interviewed in an attempt to identify instances of institutional abuse - the officer suggested that the difficulties in detecting abuse lay within the senior management of Social Services not providing the direction to tackle the problem ('*they've got the structure and the skills, just not the director*'). Four of the forces visited echoed these sentiments, stating that the disappearance of a young person from care was not sufficient

THE POLICE RESPONSE TO MISSING PERSONS

evidence to presume abuse. All were adamant that a 'significant mandate' had to be available to the police before returned missing persons were referred to child protection teams.

In practice, all forces suggested that a degree of discretion is employed when following up the return of missing persons. Interviews may often amount to little more than a 'word in the back of the car'. One force suggested that all vulnerable missing persons were interviewed; others claimed that at least all children (with the exception of repeat runaways) were spoken to. Another force saw benefit in attempting to match female returned missing persons with female police officers in an attempt to elicit information from them. All forces were quick to point out that the focus of any interview was partly upon 'offences disclosed' as well as the possibility of the missing person being the victim of crime.

Cancellation

Respondents were specifically asked to provide details on the procedures for cancelling the report of a missing person. In particular, information was elicited on how officers satisfy themselves that a missing person has, indeed, returned. Most respondents stated that individuals reported missing would be seen by a police officer before the report was cancelled. One officer suggested that in the case of repeat runaways from local authority homes, notification from care staff would usually be considered sufficient. An officer in another force was keen to stress the need to positively identify the missing person before cancelling the report. This concern originated from a case when an individual posed as a returned missing person, only to be eventually charged as a co-offender for the murder of the missing person some years later.

Although the sighting of a missing person will, in most instances, provide sufficient reassurance to officers cancelling a report, a number of other issues should also be considered by forces. In particular:

- procedures may be needed to allow reports to be cancelled when a missing person has *not* returned home, but the police are satisfied that they are safe;
- forces may wish to consider the level of authority required to cancel a missing person report; and
- forces should consider the police response to long term missing persons, including both their 'filing' and future review. These cases should rarely be cancelled.

Although certain key points need to be addressed within a force policy on missing persons (these have been outlined in this chapter), the underlying heterogeneity of

THE POLICE RESPONSE TO MISSING PERSONS

missing persons makes it difficult for any formal policy to be wholly prescriptive. Guidance and discretion are critical features of the police response to this problem. The next chapter examines a number of the strategic issues which re-occur throughout the police response to missing persons.

4. Strategic issues

The previous chapter has illustrated the various stages through which a typical report of a missing person will pass once it comes to the attention of the police. These stages have covered the practical police response to a reported missing person, from the initial actions through to the procedures for cancelling a report. However, the research has highlighted the existence of a number of themes which re-occur throughout these stages. These appear to be of a strategic nature, relating to the police *approach to* the handling of missing persons, rather than the practical actions taken by the police. This chapter provides a summary and discussion of these issues, with reference to practice in individual forces.

Responsibility

The very nature of a missing person report makes it difficult to establish whom should be responsible for its handling. Just as the status of the missing person may change over time, so too must the police response to a report be dynamic.

The initial report of a missing person will usually be handled by divisional officers. If immediate evidence of foul play is uncovered then the report is most likely to be passed to the CID. However, most cases do not progress in this manner. The initial actions undertaken will, in the vast majority of cases, result in a missing person form being retained 'on division'. The subsequent management of these cases may often be poorly defined. It is at this stage that clear levels of responsibility need to be identified so that the report is effectively handled and the likely status of the missing person is correctly assessed.

The research highlighted the difficulty in establishing the exact levels of responsibility at this stage of the police handling of a missing person report. At every force visited the report was handled primarily by the duty shift on each area or division. The responsibility to transfer reports from one shift to another usually resided with either the duty sergeant or inspector. A variety of mechanisms were in place to facilitate this transfer, ranging from the display of 'active' cases on a designated area of the duty noticeboard, the leaving of reports in on-coming supervisors' 'in-trays', and the physical handing over of reports from one individual to another. It was recognised in a number of forces that their system was not infallible and may have resulted in reports being misplaced or being left unattended for several days. For this reason four of the seven forces had introduced changes in the way in which cases were supervised.

In Cambridgeshire and Leicestershire a named individual was to be nominated in each area / division to oversee *all* reports of missing persons (at the time of the visit these positions were filled in two divisions of Cambridgeshire and in one area of

STRATEGIC ISSUES

Leicestershire). The specific responsibilities of the dedicated missing person officers were not identical, although both included providing advice to the duty shift officers on the investigation of, and searching for, missing persons. As well as overseeing all reports, the dedicated missing person officers became more fully involved in some cases depending upon the duration of the disappearance and the perceived 'vulnerability' of the missing person. Dedicated officers also suggested they were in a good position to facilitate the involvement of CID officers if the case merited it.

All of the officers interviewed in these two forces stressed that the role of a dedicated missing person officer was a positive contribution to the police handling of missing persons. Not only did they gain expertise in the investigation of cases, but their co-ordinating role provided the force with a source of expertise in *patterns* of disappearances. Both officers suggested that their close links with other police departments, in particular child protection units, domestic violence teams and external agencies such as social services and health authorities, enabled them to monitor and respond effectively to particularly at-risk individuals (the designated missing person officer in Cambridgeshire was located within the family unit specifically for this purpose). Similarly, each officer's close ties with local children's homes was regarded as a mechanism for the more efficient handling of repeat runaways and the early identification of any incidents of abuse or carer malpractice.

Although no specific evaluation of the dedicated missing person officer post had been conducted in either force, anecdotal evidence of their contribution to the police handling of missing persons was available. Both the officers concerned and their immediate supervisors suggested that the creation of a full-time post was more than offset by the hours saved in duty shift officers' time. The additional benefits of acquired expertise and consistency in the monitoring of reports were regarded as valuable assets to the police handling of missing persons in each force.

Two other forces (Thames Valley Police and West Yorkshire Police) had delegated a second tier of responsibility for missing persons to nominated *units* at each area / division; the customer service desk and the community safety department respectively. Their primary function in relation to missing persons was an overseeing role. The departments also provided a central place for the collection, monitoring and storage of missing person reports.

In all forces, clear paths of responsibility should be identified for all officers involved in the handling of missing person reports. This should include the specific duties of the officer receiving the initial report, his or her supervisor(s) and officers

with higher level responsibilities. A number of forces have developed job descriptions for each rank likely to be involved with the handling of missing persons with this specific objective in mind.

In the event of forces introducing dedicated missing person officers or units, protocols need to be firmly established for identifying who will take control of missing person reports, both initially and as the case progresses. The dedicated missing person officers and the nominated units are unlikely to be available 24 hours-a-day, and therefore reports could be left unattended if communication is not adequate and areas of responsibility not clearly established.

Recording

Like most incidents that come to the attention of the police, the report of a missing person initiates a flow of information. This will normally include details of the individual missing, their family background, the circumstances of their disappearance, details of their friends and associates and, subsequently in most cases, the whereabouts of the person when missing / found. Although this information will doubtless assist with the police enquiry to trace the missing person, it may also prove to be a useful source of intelligence in the event of the individual coming to the attention of the police in the future (e.g. repeat runaways). In order that this information can be accessed efficiently, forces should consider the systems they have in place for the long-term recording of missing person information.

The need to maintain an accurate record of the police response to the report of a missing person can not be overstated. What begins as a relatively low priority missing person enquiry can become a homicide investigation, with or without the discovery of a body. In these circumstances it is imperative that the police are able to provide a detailed account of the timing and location of specific actions, and who has undertaken them.

Missing persons forms

All forces used missing person forms for collecting basic details of the individual and to record the progress of the enquiry. However, the priority given to completing the forms varied. Several forces were conscious of their possible value to future enquiries and were clear in their expectation that all incidents of a missing person would be formally documented regardless of the duration of the incident. However, another force was less concerned with the 'paper exercise' of filling forms in. One officer revealed that forms are only completed after the initial

STRATEGIC ISSUES

actions have been undertaken, and officers are sure that they are dealing with a 'real' missing person. He commented that the completion of the missing person form occurs 'after the dust has settled'.

The use of paper forms to record the details of missing persons and the subsequent police enquiry raises a number of issues. Forces may wish to consider:

- does the location of 'live' forms allow easy access for officers and supervisors dealing with the enquiries?;
- are finalised forms stored in a manner which permits future access?;
- for what duration are finalised reports to be held in storage?; and
- are forms to be allocated a reference number, to allow for easy searching?

Officers from a number of the forces visited were keen to discuss the content and purpose of missing person forms. In particular, views were expressed on the effect that using forms has on the officers completing the report. One force suggested that missing person forms should be deliberately brief, allowing most details (other than the basic particulars of the missing person) to be recorded in a free-text manner. This, it was argued, would prevent the handling of a missing person from becoming an 'administrative chore', and would instil in officers the attitude *'I'm not going there just to fill a form in'*.

Other respondents acknowledged the benefits that may be gained from having a 'tick-box' style form, preventing officers from omitting to perform certain enquiries. Similarly, the inclusion of *aide* memories (providing both force policy and action check-lists) within the form was heralded by a number of officers to be a significant step forward.

Information technology

Although missing person forms are mainly used for collecting operational information, there is some evidence that the transfer of details to a computer database may enhance the police response to missing persons. The reliance on paper forms can hinder future access to information and allows little analysis or intelligence gathering on, for example, the destinations and circumstances of missing persons.

Six of the seven forces visited suggested that missing person incidents would normally be recorded on the force operational / command system. Two forces had developed specific enhancements to their operational information systems in which information on missing persons could be stored. This allowed aggregate data on

missing persons to be prepared and searches to be undertaken on missing person incidents. One other force had introduced a stand-alone system for the recording of missing person information.

Figure 5: In-force practice: using information technology

At the time of the visit to Devon and Cornwall Constabulary, the missing person policy was being reviewed in conjunction with the introduction of an information technology missing persons project. The application was to form part of the new Operational Information System (OIS). Officers were able to demonstrate a prototype version of the product which allowed increased searching capacity both within the missing person index and across wider data sources on the OIS (e.g. Criminal Record Office numbers and found property). The application was set to replace a previous manual system for the collection and retrieval of missing person information, and was expected to deliver a range of management information.

Likewise, Greater Manchester Police had developed an application for the recording of missing person information within their OIS. This was maintained in the Force Names Bureau, allowing easy access to the numbers of, and information regarding, current missing persons and the monitoring of patterns of disappearance. Records related specifically to missing persons, persistent missing persons and the long-term missing – allowing details of each disappearance to be accessed on the OIS by all officers within the force.

Catford Station of the Metropolitan Police Service used an application developed initially for a stand-alone computer for the recording, retrieval and analysis of missing persons cases and enquiries. Although this was not integrated with other force information systems it did provide an impressive, if localised, tool for the handling of missing person information. The application was developed using standard Microsoft Access software and was available to all officers in the station on a Local Area Network. Apart from providing an effective mechanism for the retrieval of statistical data, the application stored timely operational information on the progress of any enquiry and allowed officers to search the database for previous related incidents.

Accountability

The handling of missing persons is potentially a sensitive area of police activity. The temptation to 'do the minimum' required in anticipation of a quick return is regularly balanced against the possibility that the report may result in a protracted investigation. When enquiries develop into more serious investigations it is imperative that the police are able to produce an accurate record of what activity has already taken place. Several forces had elected to remind their officers of this

STRATEGIC ISSUES

eventuality by acknowledging in the policy that a missing person enquiry is potentially the first step of a homicide investigation.

All of the forces visited operated a 'paper trail' of the police enquiry. A number of the missing person forms produced by the participating forces included a list of key actions and checks to be endorsed by the completing officer (for example, completion of house search, interview the person reporting the disappearance, obtain a photograph). The name of the officer completing the missing person form was required on most forms.

Subsequent actions were usually endorsed on a separate sheet which was attached to the end of the missing person form. These were variously described as *continuation sheets* or a *running log* of the actions and observations relevant to the report. The interviews raised a number of important points in relation to the maintenance of these logs:

- entries made should be signed, dated and timed by the officer completing the form;
- entries need to be accurate, up-to-date and clearly legible;
- forces may wish to consider the need for logs to be regularly checked by supervisors; and
- entries should include policy decisions (an example provided by one respondent was the decision to delay the searching of a river for a missing person who may still be alive).

A number of officers raised their concerns at the use of continuation sheets within their force. Several were familiar with the poor level of accountability which results from the addition of 'scrap paper' to missing person forms. There was also a concern, in some forces, that paper attachments to a missing person form can 'go missing' in the event of the actions or decisions becoming the focus of unwanted attention.

Forces should require all additional entries to be made on official report forms which are firmly secured to the original report. In a number of forces these sheets are now numbered to ensure a degree of continuity. The use of information technology to record subsequent entries on a missing person form may obviate the need for fragile paper-based systems (see, for example, Figure 6).

Figure 6: In-force practice: information technology and accountability

The IT application implemented within Catford Station of the Metropolitan Police Service was developed specifically to ensure a path of accountability when dealing with missing person cases. The supervisory function of the system was described as one of its 'key assets'. Each time any officer entered the system (either the officer dealing with the report or those in a supervisory capacity) their warrant number and time were automatically endorsed onto the appropriate missing person record. Investigating officers were assigned tasks via the application and were required to record the details of their actions and any information acquired back onto the system. The fact that officers had nowhere else to record these details (missing person forms were only used to record enquiry details in the event of computer failure) ensured compliance with the system. Consequently, the application could be used to provide an up-to-date account of actions and decisions taken, personnel involved, and the general progress of the enquiry. The officer responsible for the system suggested that the new application ensured an accurate accountability trail for supervisors and a mechanism for investigating officers to 'cover their backs'.

Inter-agency working

The task of responding effectively to the report of a missing person may not always reside solely with the police. As discussed in Chapter 2, persons from all walks of life go missing for a variety of different reasons. In some instances when an individual disappears voluntarily, complex social issues will impact upon the decision of a person to leave their usual surroundings. Rarely, in these circumstances, will the police response alone be sufficient to deal with these problems *at source*. Although police activity may secure the return of individual missing persons, it is likely that co-operation with a range of other agencies may assist the police to develop more effective strategies for dealing with particular types of missing person.

Responding to repeat runaways: Local Government Association IACPO guidance

A recent attempt has been made to provide some formal guidance on how the police can respond effectively to the problems posed by repeat runaways. On the recommendation of the Posen Report (Home Office, 1995a and 1995b), a formal working party was established to examine the issues with representatives from the police, social services, the Department of Health, voluntary organisations and academics. The final report of the working party, *Missing From Care: Procedures and Practices in Caring For Missing Children* was published by the Local Government Association in 1997.

STRATEGIC ISSUES

The report highlights the importance of the police and social services taking *joint* responsibility for the return of children missing from care. It is suggested that a strategy should be drawn up between each police force and social services department, in consultation with providers in the independent sector, to establish a framework for responding to these incidents. This should include an agreement on the respective roles of each agency in assessing the risk of missing children. Having completed a risk assessment, social services staff should categorise a child's absence under one of the three headings detailed in Figure 7.

Figure 7: Categories of absence	
Category of absence	Definition
Unauthorised absence	Clearly some children absent themselves for a short period and then return. Such children may be testing boundaries and are not necessarily considered at risk.
Missing	Where the child's location is unknown or reason for absence is unknown and there is cause for concern for the child because of their vulnerability or there is a potential danger to the public.
Absconded	An absconder is a child who is missing and is also looked after as a result of a Court Order. The police have the power of arrest without warrant when absent without permission of the responsible person for him/her.

Source: Local Government Association (1997), p12

The report highlights the need to continuously monitor the circumstances surrounding an 'unauthorised absence' and re-categorise the child as 'missing' if deemed appropriate. It recommends that all missing and absconded persons should be brought to the attention of the police immediately. The police response upon notification of a missing or absconded child should be agreed in a Police Action Plan.

The principle of working with social services when dealing with repeat runaways was greeted favourably by almost all interviewees. Many commented that the carers of young runaways were in a much better position to conduct an informed risk assessment than the police, and should be encouraged to take a more active role when the individuals they supervise disappear. However, concern was expressed by one officer at the level of skill needed to conduct a thorough risk assessment. The officer was particularly anxious that many care homes employed their least experienced staff at the times when reported disappearances were at their highest.

A general concern was raised about the possibility of social services not informing the police of certain disappearances (i.e. in the case of 'unauthorised absences'). It was felt by some respondents that this information should be held by police, even if not acted upon, for intelligence purposes.

Missing persons and prostitution: The Street and Lanes project

Several recent studies have indicated that a link exists between going missing, especially from care, and involvement in prostitution (see Rees, 1993; Lee & O'Brien, 1995). In a study of young runaways who came into contact with four streetwork projects, Stein *et al* found that one in seven runaways had traded 'sex for money' in order to survive on the streets. Local surveys of young missing persons undertaken in Birmingham and Manchester indicated that 15% and 20% respectively reported involvement in prostitution (Stein *et al* 1994). Furthermore, it would appear that many of the missing persons who become involved in prostitution originally leave home or care because of sexual abuse committed against them (Silbert & Pines, 1981).

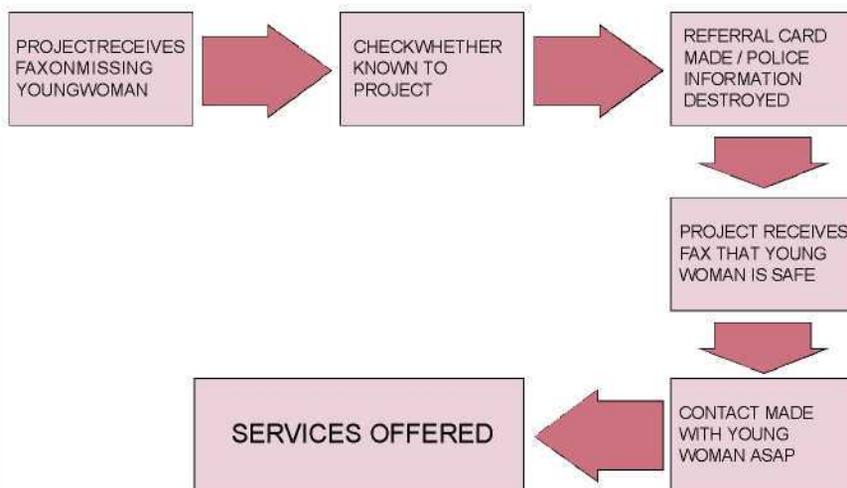
This leaves the police with a complex problem. Not only is there a need to consider the *push* and *puff* factors in a disappearance (young persons may be *pushed into* leaving home by abuse, and may be *pulled away* under the enticement of pimps), but the police have to assess the vulnerability of a missing person, taking account of the added risks of 'working the streets' and associating with the criminal fraternity. Three of the forces which replied to the missing person questionnaire indicated that these issues had an impact upon the police handling of missing persons. West Yorkshire Police had been party to a scheme involving several local agencies with the aim of intervening in the cycle of going missing and prostitution (see figure 8).

STRATEGIC ISSUES

Figure 8: In-force practice: working with other agencies to tackle sexual exploitation

The Street and Lanes (SALs) project is a partnership between Barnardo's, Bradford Council, Bradford Health and Bradford Community Health Trust, supported by West Yorkshire Police and West Yorkshire Probation Service. It provides a multi-agency approach to working with girls and young women who are vulnerable to, or involved in, sexual exploitation and abuse. The initial work of the project confirmed the strong link between incidents of sexual exploitation and going missing (in the first year of operation, 84% of project users had been reported missing at some stage).

As a result, the project has launched a Missing Young Person Scheme. The police fax details of all young missing females to the project who create their own index.



When notified of their return, a project worker will arrange to visit the young person to issue a 'Helpline card' should the person need to discuss any problems in the future. The worker discusses the reasons for the disappearance, explains the potential for abuse and exploitation which the young person may be vulnerable to, and offers immediate support if required. The use of project workers and trained volunteers from a range of backgrounds can overcome the difficulties commonly experienced by the police when attempting to intervene in the behaviour of these persons.

Missing persons from ethnic minorities

The research revealed some evidence to suggest that people from some ethnic minorities may have particular reasons for going missing. Five forces from the original 46 which replied to the questionnaire expressed some degree of concern

about young females running away from arranged marriages, domestic violence within such marriages, or the prospect of an arranged marriage.

These issues put the police in a very sensitive position. The need to respect a minority's culture and tradition has to be balanced with the police role of preventing and detecting crime. West Yorkshire Police have responded by creating, in conjunction with the local council, a non-police post specifically to deal with this problem.

Figure 9: In-force practice: helping missing persons from an ethnic minority

The post of Bradford Area Community Officer (West Yorkshire Police) was created in response to the increasing number of Asian females who were running away from home in response to domestic or cultural conflict. Experience suggested that the specific causes for going missing included physical and sexual abuse and fleeing from arranged marriages. Families had been known to go to extraordinary lengths to locate and punish females who run away, the latter including physical assault, forced transportation to the Indian Sub-Continent and even murder. The post is co-funded by West Yorkshire Police and City of Bradford Council.

The community officer's main area of work is finding Asian women who have left home. Not all of these have been reported to the police; it is estimated that between 5% and 10% of referrals originate as missing from home reports. The vast majority of referrals come from external sources. These include women who are referred by other agencies or individuals, and self-referrals.

Once contact has been established with the missing person the main role of the community officer is to ensure their safety. This can take the form of offering advice, assisting the woman to find accommodation, helping to secure her lawful property, arranging meetings with family members and acting as an intermediary so as not to compromise the woman's whereabouts. The role of protecting life and property has to be balanced with the need to maintain good relations between the police and the wider Asian community.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5. Conclusions and recommendations

Dealing with the report of a missing person is a regular occurrence for all police forces. The sheer number of reports, coupled with the fact that most incidents are resolved relatively quickly with no significant harm having befallen the individual concerned, makes the police handling of missing persons an often mundane and, in some instances, routine task.

The problem for the police is the knowledge that among the great majority of such cases will be a small proportion which require a more immediate and intensive response. Some persons will have gone missing in order to escape abuse or domestic violence. Others may be missing as the result of an accident or may be lost or vulnerable to the natural elements. A very small percentage of the total number of people who go missing will have been the victims of serious crime. If the police can not identify such cases, and are seen to be slow to respond to the report of a missing person who is, in fact, a murder victim, they will both miss investigative opportunities and are likely to be the subject of much criticism.

This report has illustrated the need for the police to have procedures in place to deal effectively with missing persons. Although most forces do have missing person policies, the following points are recommended to forces for consideration:

- The identification of clear paths of responsibility for the handling of missing person reports should be undertaken in all forces. This should include the specific duties of officers of different ranks, the exchange of cases between shifts and the role of different units involved with missing persons. Forces may wish to consider nominating an officer or unit to oversee all reports of missing persons.
- Forces should think carefully about how they classify the report of a missing person, and the effect this may have upon the police response.
- An accurate record should be maintained of the timing and location of all places searched and personnel involved. Forces may particularly wish to consider the development of expertise in the management, supervision and planning of searches specifically for missing persons.
- Each force should agree the necessary personnel, timing and terms of reference for the effective review of missing person reports. The inclusion of members of the CID and other appropriate departments is recommended.
- Forces should consider the systems they have in place for recording missing person information. In particular, the possible benefits of an enhanced analysis of

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

patterns of disappearances and the collection of intelligence on previous missing 'episodes' may make the use of information technology an attractive proposition.

- The police response to the report of a missing person should be recorded in a manner which ensures accountability. Actions, personnel, times, observations, decisions and policy should all be readily available should the enquiry become a more serious investigation.
- The recent review of the procedures for dealing with persons missing from care (*Missing From Care: Procedures and Practices in Caring For Missing Children*) should be consulted by all forces.
- Procedures to ensure the identification of suspicious missing persons are currently under-developed. The reliance on experience and professional judgement makes it particularly important that inexperienced officers receive the appropriate level of supervision and support.

Future research in the area should:

- assess the reliability of traditional classification criteria in identifying those missing persons who are likely to be the victims of serious crime; and
- develop guidance to assist the police to identify suspicious missing persons at an early stage in the case.

Finally, the Home Office might consider the following recommendation:

- There is a need to review the sometimes overlapping role, scope and effectiveness of organisations which currently have a national function with respect to missing persons. No organisation currently holds a complete list of outstanding persons missing in the UK at any one time.

REFERENCES

References:

Abrahams, C. & Mungall, R. (1992) *Runaways: Exploding the Myths*
London: National Children's Home.

Aitken, C, Connolly, T., Gammerman, A., Zhang, G. & Oldfield, R. (1995)
Predicting an Offender's Characteristics: an evaluation of statistical modelling
Police Research Group Special Interest Series no.4- London: Home Office.

Council of Europe (1979) *Search for Missing Persons*
Recommendation No. R (79) 6. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.

Diez, L. (1995) *The Use of Call Grading: How Calls to the Police are Graded and Resourced*
Police Research Group Police Research Series no. 13. London: Home Office.

Home Office (1995a) *Review of Police Core and Ancillary Task*
Final Report. London: HMSO.

Home Office (1995b) *Review of Police Core and Ancillary Tasks*
Appendices. London: HMSO.

Kirkwood, A. (1993) *The Leicestershire Incident 1992*.
Leicester: Leicestershire County Council.

Lee, M. & O'Brien, R. (1995) *The Game's Up. Redefining Child Prostitution*
London: The Children's Society.

Local Government Association & Association of Chief Police Officers (1997)
Missing From Care: Procedures and Practices in Caring For Missing Children
London: Local Government Association

Newman, C. (1989) *Young Runaways: Findings From Britain's First Safe House*
London: The Children's Society.

Newiss, G. (1997) 'Introduction to the Serious Crime Research Programme', in
Police Research Group Focus 9. London: Home Office Police Policy Directorate.

Rees, G. (1993) *Hidden Truths: Young People's Experiences of Running Away*
London: The Children's Society.

REFERENCES

Silbert, M. & Pines, A. (1981) Sexual Child Abuse as an Antecedent to Prostitution, *Child Abuse and Neglect* 5 (2) pp407-11.

Stein, M., Frost, N. & Rees, G. (1994) *Running the Risk: Young People on the Streets of Britain Today* London: The Children's Society.

Stein, M., Biehal, N. & Wade, J. (1997) 'Running away from care and accommodation: research in progress', in *Young Runaways: Report of a National Seminar* Dartington: Dartington Social Research Unit.

Tilley, N. (1997) 'Missing from home' in Police Research Group, Focus 9. London: Home Office Police Policy Directorate.

Wade, J., Biehal, N., Clayden, J. & Stein, M. (1998) *Going Missing: Young People Absent From Care*. Chichester: Wiley.

Appendix 1

The National Missing Persons Helpline (NMPH)

The National Missing Persons Helpline is a registered charity established in 1992. It offers a variety of services including a national 24 hour helpline, providing support, assistance and practical advice to the families of missing persons.

The NMPH provides services to the police including:

- access to a national computerised register of missing people;
- a Reconstruction and Identification Department, which has a member of staff trained in computer age progression techniques, composite drawing and skull reconstruction methods; and
- two open days / training courses every year to inform police officers of the work of the NMPH.

The NMPH is able to obtain publicity for missing person enquiries with its connections to a number of local, regional and national radio and television stations, newspapers and magazines. The NMPH also runs 'Message Home', a confidential 24 hour answerphone service for those who have left home, but wish to leave a message for a member of their family.

Contact:

The National Missing Persons Helpline
Roebuck House
284 -286 Upper Richmond Road West
London
SW14 7JE
Telephone: 0208 392 4545.

The Police National Missing Persons Bureau (PNMPB)

The PNMPB interchanges information about missing persons between UK police forces, and provides assistance in the identification of persons / bodies found. The PNMPB holds a database of vulnerable missing persons, as defined in the Home Office Circular (12/1994):

- all persons under 18 years of age;
- persons aged 18 or over who suffer from epilepsy, diabetes or amnesia, or who have suicidal tendencies or some other special feature which makes it desirable to have them on record without delay;
- persons who are 65 years of age or older;
- informal mental patients who are reported missing by next-of-kin, relatives or neighbours;
- persons whose disappearance gives reason to suspect that some harm may befall them;
- persons normally resident in the United Kingdom who are believed to have travelled abroad; and
- persons normally resident abroad who are reported to have disappeared whilst within the United Kingdom.

Forces are required to send details of all missing persons who are still outstanding after 14 days, and the details of unidentified bodies within 48 hours after being found. Cases of vulnerable missing persons can be sent earlier if appropriate.

Contact:

The Police National Missing Persons Bureau
SO4 Branch
New Scotland Yard
Broadway
London
SW1H OBG
Telephone: 0207 230 4029 / 4745

RECENT POLICE RESEARCH GROUP AND POLICING AND REDUCING CRIME UNIT PUBLICATIONS:

Police Research Group

Crime Detection and Prevention Series papers

90. **Repeat Victimisation: Taking Stock.** Ken Pease. 1998.
91. **Auditing Crime and Disorder: Guidance for Local Partnerships.** Michael Hough and **Nick Tilley.** 1998.
92. **New Heroin Outbreaks Amongst Young People in England and Wales.** Howard Parker, Catherine Bury and Roy Eggington. 1998.

Policing and Reducing Crime Unit

Police Research Series papers

99. **Sex Offending Against Children: Understanding the Risk.** Don Grubin. 1998.
100. **Policing Domestic Violence: Effective Organisational Structures.** Joyce Plotnikoff and Richard Woolfson. 1999.
101. **Pulling the Plug on Computer Theft.** Paula Whitehead and Paul Gray. 1999.
102. **Face Value? Evaluating the Accuracy of Eyewitness Information.** Mark R. Kebbell and Graham F. Wagstaff. 1999.
103. **Applying Economic Evaluation to Policing Activity.** J.E. Stockdale, C.M.E. Whitehead and P.J.Gresham. 1999.
104. **Arresting Evidence: Domestic Violence and Repeat Victimisation.** Jalna Hanmer, Sue Griffiths and David Jerwood. 1999.
105. **Proactive Policing on Merseyside.** Alana Barton, Roger Evans. 1999.
106. **Tenure: Policy and Practice.** Gary Mundy. 1999.
107. **Career Progression of Ethnic Minority Police Officers.** Nick Bland, Gary Mundy, Jacqueline Russell and Rachel Tuffin. 1999.
108. **Preventing Residential Burglary in Cambridge: From Crime Audits to Targeted Strategies.** Trevor Bennett and Linda Durie. 1999.
109. **Policing Drug Hot-Spots.** Jessica Jacobson. 1999.
110. **Understanding and preventing police corruption: lessons from the literature** Tim Newburn. 1999.
111. **On a Course: Reducing the impact of police training on availability for ordinary duty.** Peter R. Langmead Jones. 1999.
112. **Hot Products: understanding, anticipating and reducing demand for stolen goods.** Ronald V. Clarke. 1999.
113. **Consolidating Police Crackdowns: findings from an anti-burglary project.** Graham Farrell, Sylvia Chenery and Ken Pease. 1999.

