

Missing persons

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Written by College of Policing

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Introduction

Going missing should be treated as an indicator that the individual may be at risk of harm. The safeguarding of vulnerable people is paramount and a missing person report should be recognised as an opportunity to identify and address risks. The reasons for a person deciding to go missing may be complex and linked to a variety of social or family issues.

Three key factors should be considered in a missing person investigation:

- protecting those at risk of harm
- minimising distress and ensuring high quality of service to the families and carers of missing persons
- prosecuting those who perpetrate harm or pose a risk of harm when this is appropriate and supported by evidence

Support for law enforcement agencies

Police investigators can contact the following specialists for advice and assistance in missing and unidentified person investigations.

- UK Missing Persons Unit (UKMPU) on 0800 234 6034
- NCA Major Crime Investigative Support (MCIS) on 0345 000 5463

Definition of 'missing'

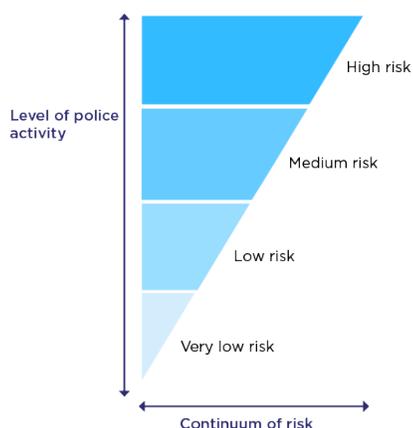
Anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established will be considered as missing until located, and their well-being or otherwise confirmed.

This is a broad definition, intended to ensure that all cases of people suspected of being missing who are reported to the police are considered for a policing response. The nature of the response is for operational decision makers. Not all reports of missing people will require immediate deployment of police resources.

All reports of missing people sit within a continuum of risk from very low risk through to high-risk cases that require immediate, intensive action. All should be viewed as missing persons and the appropriate response initiated. In some cases, there will be very limited police action – an initial investigation to inform a risk assessment, followed by instructions or advice to the person reporting on the next steps they should take and setting a review time. In other cases, immediate police action may be required.

The framing of risk of harm within a continuum is intended to indicate that there should not be defined steps between the various risk levels, but that the boundaries are, in reality, more blurred.

Missing definition



Risk assessment and response

The risk assessment table

The following table should be used as a guide to an appropriate level of police response based on initial and on-going risk assessment in each case. Risk assessment should be guided by the College of Policing [Risk principles](#), the [national decision model \(NDM\)](#) and police [Code of Ethics](#).

Very low risk	
There is a very low risk of harm to either the subject or the public.	Actions to locate the subject and/or gather further information should be agreed with the informant and a latest review time set to reassess the risk.
Low risk	
The risk of harm to the subject or the public is assessed as possible but minimal.	Proportionate enquiries should be carried out to ensure that the individual has not come to harm.
Medium risk	
The risk of harm to the subject or the public is assessed as likely but not serious.	This category requires an active and measured response by the police and other agencies in order to trace the missing person and support the person reporting.
High risk	

The risk of serious harm to the subject or the public is assessed as very likely.

This category almost always requires the immediate deployment of police resources – action may be delayed in exceptional circumstances, such as searching water or forested areas during hours of darkness. In many of these cases, there will also be consideration of serious crime. All of the issues that need to be addressed in those cases will need coordination with any missing person enquiry. A member of the senior management team must be involved in the examination of initial lines of enquiry and approval of appropriate staffing levels. Such cases should lead to the appointment of an investigating officer (IO) and possibly an SIO, and a police search adviser (PoISA).

There should be a press/media strategy and/or close contact with outside agencies. Family support should be put in place where appropriate. The UKMPU should be notified of the case without undue delay. Children's services must also be notified immediately if the person is under 18.

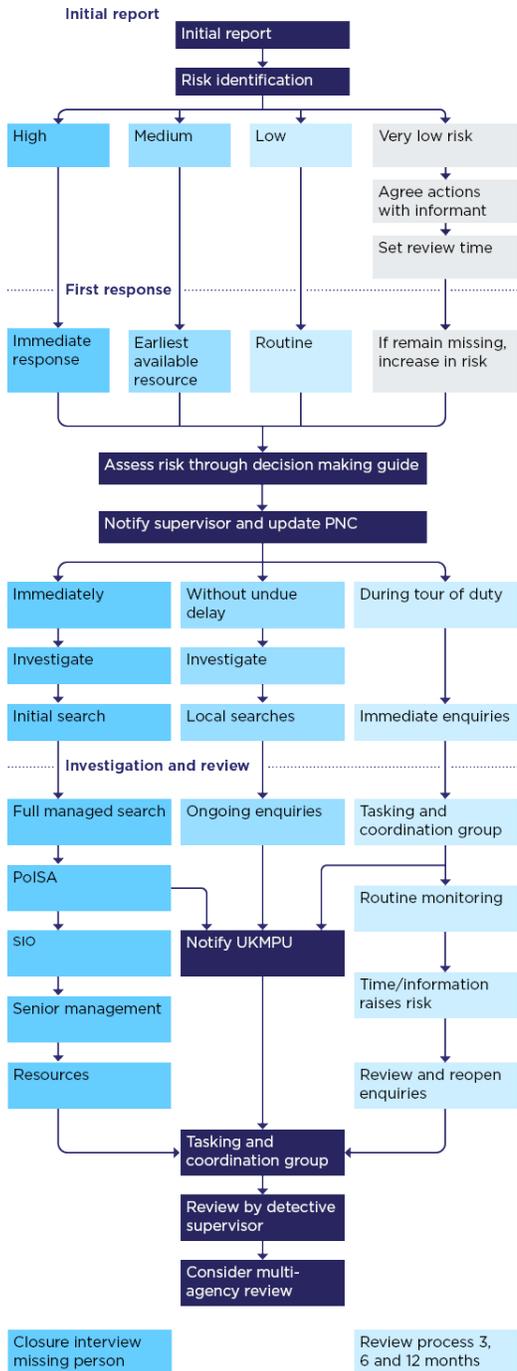
Risk of serious harm has been defined as (Home Office, 2002; OASys, 2006):

A risk which is life threatening and/or traumatic, and from which recovery, whether physical or psychological, can be expected to be difficult or impossible.

Where the risk cannot be accurately assessed without active investigation, appropriate lines of enquiry should be set to gather the required information to inform the risk assessment.

The missing persons process chart

This chart is intended to provide a useful framework for staff to work from. Decisions and rationale for deviations are acceptable, provided they are justified and recorded.



Joint responsibility

The police are entitled to expect parents and carers, including staff acting in a parenting role in adult care homes and children care homes, to accept normal parenting responsibilities and undertake reasonable actions to try and establish the whereabouts of the individual. Children who are breaching parental discipline should not be dealt with by police unless there are other risks. For example, a child who is late home from a party should not be regarded as missing until the parent or carer has undertaken enquiries to locate the child. Once those enquiries have been completed, it may be appropriate to record the child as missing and take actions set out in this APP.

Parents or carers may need police support if they are very distressed, incapacitated or otherwise unable to undertake enquiries. In such circumstances, it may be appropriate to make a referral to the local authority so that the standard of care for the missing person can be reviewed.

Individuals whose whereabouts are known will not be considered as missing, but may require other police activity in order to ensure their welfare. Police should consult their local public protection procedures to ensure an appropriate safeguarding response is provided. This includes children in care who are deemed to be 'absent without authorisation' (as defined within the [Department for Education \(2014\) Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care](#)).

Minimum actions

Minimum actions will be undertaken in all missing persons cases. Further activities should be identified and actioned as necessary in some cases, based upon the circumstances and assessed risk.

The minimum actions to be undertaken in all cases are:

- create a record on the force command and control system, and/or the force missing person reporting system (see [The police role and responsibilities](#) and [Positive action](#)) (unless, after investigation, the investigator assesses that the report is maliciously motivated, such as a person seeking to use police to trace an individual for malign purposes. It is likely that senior officer oversight will be required in these cases. Even in these cases, a record may still be required to inform other police action)
- complete a risk assessment and use this to inform what actions will be taken and when (if risk levels change the response should be reviewed)

- create and record a plan of immediate actions, which may include checking friends/relatives etc. It should be agreed and documented if these actions will be undertaken by police or the reporting person, depending on the circumstances of the incident
- set the latest time to review the risk assessment and activity, based on the circumstances of the report. The reasoning for this time frame should be clearly documented and the informant advised. The review may take place before the latest time if new information comes to light
- consider circulating the person as missing on the Police National Computer (PNC) and check to determine if the person may be in custody
- if the missing person is aged under 18, local children's services must be notified (immediately if deemed to be at high risk), see [Local data sharing](#)

All reports of missing people will be subject to review, either because of the passage of time or because new information comes to light. When a review takes place, the risk assessment will need to be reconsidered and should inform whether new or different actions are required. For children and adults in care, information from multi-agency safeguarding partners should be sought in order to inform the risk assessment and on-going activity.

Note: Mental health services should be consulted if a person is thought to be suicidal or suffering from a mental health crisis to find out if the person is known to them.

National specialist support and services

The following agencies are able to advise and support forces during a missing person investigation.

UK Missing Persons Unit

The [UKMPU](#) (part of the National Crime Agency (NCA) National Investigative Capabilities Command) and the Missing Children's Team (MCT) (both of which are part of the NCA CEOP Command) work with the police and related organisations to improve services to missing person investigations.

The UKMPU is the UK's national and international point of contact for all missing persons and unidentified remains cases. The UKMPU serves all UK police forces as well as international and overseas police agencies, and is a part of a wider network of partners including other government departments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and stakeholders. The UKMPU can be

contacted about any missing person enquiry on 0800 234 6034.

Services

The UKMPU holds a national database of missing persons, unidentified bodies, remains and people found in the UK and serves to match cases across police force boundaries.

In addition to this the UKMPU also:

- provides support to any missing person enquiry that has been registered as a missing person with a police force
- liaises with the Missing Persons DNA Database (MPDD) on behalf of forces, ensuring DNA is loaded, searched and deleted when appropriate
- liaises with the National Fingerprint Office (NFO) to provide advice on the use and retention of fingerprints taken as part of missing person and unidentified body investigations
- undertakes open source and desk-based enquiries on behalf of forces

Referring cases

Police forces are required to submit case details to the UKMPU in relation to all:

- people reported missing in the UK (who are still missing after 72 hours, see below)
- foreign nationals reported as missing in the UK (via INTERPOL or any other means)
- UK nationals reported as missing abroad

If a case is of particular concern – for example, a serious crime is suspected and/or there is significant public/media interest – it should be sent to the UKMPU immediately so advice and support can be provided at the earliest opportunity.

In such cases consideration should also be given to contacting the NCA [Major Crime Investigative Support](#) (MCIS), either via the UKMPU or directly on 0800 234 6034.

MCIS can offer assistance to support investigative and search activity and has contact with a wide range of expert advisers. For more information see the [MCIS poster](#) (which should be treated as official).

Case details are required for all missing persons who remain outstanding 72 hours after the report has been made to the police. Cancellations of cases must be notified to the UKMPU within 24

hours of a force confirming the missing person's return or location.

Unidentified cases

All unidentified body/people reports must be sent to the UKMPU within 48 hours of discovery. This requirement is to assist major crime investigations and bring closure to the families of missing people who are deceased. Cancellation of such reports must be submitted to the UKMPU within 24 hours of an identification being made.

The UKMPU can assist forces in such cases by:

- completing cross-match searches of missing person reports to determine if the remains are linked to a missing person report
- providing advice around the use and retention of biometrics as part of missing person investigations
- providing access to the Dental Index – a collection of dental charts for all missing persons and unidentified remains cases
- providing the Hermes (the UKMPU case management system) reference for each case – this reference is required to allow DNA to be loaded to the MPDD
- uploading DNA to the MPDD, requesting that the DNA is checked across all databases
- providing advice and support around international enquiries relating to unidentified remains cases including INTERPOL's Black Notices, Diffusions, international enquiry forms and loading DNA to I-Familia

Charities

Missing People

Missing People is a national, independent charity and offers support to missing people and their families. The charity works closely with police forces across the UK and can offer a range of services to support missing person investigations.

Missing People provides the following:

Family support

Police can refer families to Missing People for support at any point during an investigation. There is a 24-hour confidential helpline (116000) which provides emotional and practical advice and support.

Publicity

The charity coordinates national or local targeted publicity on behalf of the police using a variety of media. Publicity can also be limited to safeguarding organisations (such as hostels) and kept out of the public domain, via the charity's Safeguarding Briefing Network. When a family member asks for publicity, the relevant force will be contacted to obtain consent. Missing People is experienced in managing high-profile cases and complex investigations.

Sightings

There is a 24-hour free phone helpline to take sightings from the public. Missing People manages sightings and information on behalf of the police so that information is fed quickly into the investigation.

TextSafe®

At police request, a message with the 116 000 number can be sent to a missing person's phone so that they know how to reach free confidential support.

Child Rescue Alert

The NCA is the delivery partner for issuing Child Rescue Alert appeals to the public at large via SMS, email and social and digital media.

Missing People offers a variety of additional services for missing people and their families including a 24-hour helpline for missing children and adults, and a 'Reconnect' service.

Website: missingpeople.org.uk

Tel: 116000 (24 hours)

Email: 116000@missingpeople.org.uk

LBT Global

LBT Global was previously known as the Lucie Blackman Charity. It can offer a wealth of support to the families of missing persons, from coordinating international searches, to simply being someone to talk to.

Other charities and services

There are also a range of charities that work with families that require mental and emotional support and bereavement services, see **Sources of support**.

Tags

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