

# Missing persons risk assessment

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The nature and extent of the police response to a missing person report will be based on an assessment of the information available, the reasons why the person may be missing, and the possibility of the person being at risk of harm. Assessment of the level of risk helps to define how enquiries should be conducted.

Risk assessment is an ongoing process and it is important that relevant information is gathered through targeted enquiries and reviewed throughout the investigation in accordance with the **national decision model (NDM)** and the **risk principles**.

The following resources have been developed to assist risk assessment and response decision making.

- **Risk assessment table**
- **Missing persons process chart**

## Gathering information

At first contact, the call handler **must** gather as much relevant information as possible as this will determine the initial police response. This information will also support those responsible for the initial risk assessment in their decision-making process, directing the priority of the **police response and level of resources needed**.

In addition to the information gathered in response to the initial risk assessment questions (as outlined below), **call handlers** should record, as a minimum, the following details when taking the initial report.

- Name.
- Age.

- Description of person.
- Description of clothing.
- Home address.
- Location missing from.
- Circumstances of going missing.
- Details of any vehicle or other transport used.
- The relevant information concerning the person reporting the disappearance.
- Location of where the missing person might be.
- Any medication the missing person requires, frequency of taking and effects of not taking it.
- Information about known risks, for example, a child known to be at risk of being sexually exploited.
- Information about any person who might have contact with the missing person, such as people with whom the missing person was found in previous incidents, for example, estranged parents, boyfriends and girlfriends.
- Name, address and telephone number of person reporting. (If the missing person is in local authority care, consideration should be given to obtaining alternative and out-of-hours contact details in case the investigation is ongoing when the person reporting goes off duty.)

The call handler is a critical first point of contact in missing person cases. The level and quality of the information obtained is crucial to determining the appropriate response. Call handlers are the first to assess the level of risk and identify the urgency of the response required. All call handlers should, therefore, receive appropriate **training** in identifying and understanding risk and risk indicators, such as those relating to **sexual exploitation**.

For further information see:

- **Definition of 'missing'**
- **College Learn ? National Contact Management Learning Programme**

## Initial assessment

When carrying out an initial assessment staff and officers may access and use information from a range of sources. The person that has reported the person missing is very likely to be able to provide information, and all available information that the police force and partner organisations may hold should be considered within the assessment of risk and subsequent investigation (for example, PNC, PND and other local systems associated with safeguarding duties).

## Initial questions for the person who has submitted the missing report

The following set of questions may assist during the initial assessment of risk.

- Why are you worried about the missing person?
- What has been done so far to trace this individual?
- Is this out of character?
- Have they been missing before? If yes, what happened whilst they were missing?
- Are there any specific medical needs?
- Are they likely to become the victim of crime?
- Are they likely to be hurt or harmed?
- Are they currently at risk of **sexual exploitation**?
- Are they at risk of criminal exploitation, including county lines?
- Are they likely to self-harm or attempt suicide?
- Do they pose a danger to other people?
- Are they likely to have travelled abroad?
- Is there any other information relevant to their absence?
- Has any contact from the missing person's phone and/or social media led you to believe that the handset and/or social media accounts are in the possession of someone else? If 'yes,' please explain why.

These questions are based on practitioner experience and have not been subject to evaluation.

Officers and staff should also consider whether the person providing the information may be attempting to deliberately mislead the police investigation.

If at any point it becomes evident that the initial risk assessment may be high, the case should be brought to the attention of a supervisor for advice and/or an immediate response (see **Risk assessment and response**).

All information collected and decisions taken must be accurately recorded.

When carrying out a risk assessment, it's important to carefully detail all information and intelligence that informs it. Risk assessment requires investigation of circumstances and the use of

professional judgement.

There are many risk assessment tools that have been developed for a range of settings. These are often not based on strong evidence and might better be described as risk identification tools, which help decision makers to identify the nature, severity, timing and source of risk.

Particular care should be taken to use precise language to record what information and intelligence has been used, as well as how it has been assessed by the risk assessor. Imprecise terms, such as 'chaotic lifestyle', 'street-wise' and 'out of character', should be avoided. Or if used, they should be explained in detail – so that those using or reviewing the assessment at a later date can fully understand their meanings and the weight placed on them by the assessor.

## Frequent or planned absences

A risk assessment must be conducted for every missing report and should be based on current risk levels and not be driven by previous assumptions or experiences. When a person goes missing, whether for the first time or repeatedly, it may indicate that there are underlying issues and this should be considered when undertaking the risk assessment. These issues should be explored and may be relevant to the police investigation, future safeguarding and care planning regardless of whether the person is frequently missing, or their disappearance is out of character.

## Parent and carer responsibilities

It is expected that parents and care providers, for both children and adults, take reasonable steps to locate the missing person prior to making a report to the police.

This could include:

- attempts to contact the child or adult
- calling friends or family
- visiting areas that the child or adult is known to frequent
- visiting the place where the child or adult was known to be attending, for example, a friend's house or party
- checking to see if any items are missing from the home

The responsibilities of care providers should be outlined in local **protocols**.

It is reasonable and appropriate that the police become involved if there is concern that the parent or care provider could be put at risk when attempting to gain access to an address where the person is believed to be.

## Unreported absences

There will be instances where children or adults go missing whilst in care for short periods and they are located, in such circumstances the incident may not have been reported to the police.

Where this is the case, the care provider is responsible for recording the incident and information obtained on the whereabouts of the individual while away so that any safeguarding plans that apply to the individual can be updated. This information, if available, may be used by the police in any subsequent missing person investigation.

## Where there is very limited information

Officers and staff must carefully consider all reports to ensure that they do not mistake a lack of information as an indication that the person is safe and well.

When the missing person is located, officers should seek to properly establish their whereabouts by actually visiting and seeing the missing person where possible.

## Classification of risk

Risk assessment for missing persons should be guided by the:

- Risk principles APP
- national decision model (NDM)
- Missing persons decision-making guide (2009)

A risk assessment decision will always be subjective and is informed by professional judgement. Risk assessments should always be checked as part of the supervisory process.

## Gathering information and intelligence

Those responsible for conducting or reviewing risk assessment may seek information from the following sources:

- the informant
- associates, parents and/or other carers
- previous missing incident reports
- PNC, PND, force intelligence (and other) databases

It may also be appropriate to involve other agencies, social services and health and mental health care professionals within the risk assessment process, particularly in relation to children in the care of the local authority.

The information on which any judgement of risk is made must be recorded. It is also important to record the name and contact details of the person who gave that information and when this happened.

Missing people may be at risk of harm resulting from factors such as:

- an inability to cope with weather conditions
- being the victim of violent crime
- risks relating to non-physical harm, for example, the people they are with, the places or circumstances they are in
- suicide ideation or self-harm (for further information, see [\*\*suicide prevention strategy\*\*](#))

For further information see [\*\*Mental Vulnerability and illness: Vulnerability assessment framework\*\*](#) and [\*\*Vulnerability-related risk guidelines\*\*](#).

## Assessing risk levels and taking action

The missing persons process chart and risk table can assist officers to assess the risk level and appropriate actions that should be assigned to each case. This is a framework to assist practitioners in making operational decisions. Each case requires individual assessment and decision-making.

These resources have been developed based on professional expertise and practitioner experience and are available using the following links.

- [\*\*Risk assessment table\*\*](#)
- [\*\*Missing persons process chart\*\*](#)

It is important to adopt an investigative approach to all reports, ensuring that assumptions are not made about the reasons for going missing. Investigators should be aware of the potential for their own unconscious biases to impact risk assessments and the investigation. The importance and relevance of risk factors will depend on the circumstances of each case and require investigation to determine if there is a cause for concern.

The approach should not be regarded as a mechanical one and police officers should be mindful that the risk assessment is subjective, and that just one factor alone may be considered important enough to prompt an urgent response.

For this reason professional experience suggests that a numerical scoring system may not be the most appropriate method of identifying and communicating risk.

A **decision-making guide** should be used to encourage consistency in the application of the process, however, it should only be used as a guide. Other grounds for suspicion, even if intuitive, can be registered by the investigator and officers should be supported in applying the **National Decision Model** when making these assessments.

## Accurate record keeping

It is essential to accurately record the information received about a missing person. Information that may relate to any perceived risk should be captured at the time of reporting so that it can be used to inform any investigative enquires. This will also prevent duplication of questioning and report writing by investigation officers.

Call handlers should be supported by their supervisors to ensure that sufficient time is given to each call to enable all the relevant information to be captured. Detailed missing person reports should be created and appropriate force recording systems and IT systems should be in place to support this process.

It is important that the information used and rationale for the risk assessment is clearly recorded. Where insufficient information is available to fully assess the risk posed, actions should be set to gather further information and the risk subsequently reassessed.

## Review

Risk assessment is a dynamic and ongoing process which requires further assessments to be made as the investigation progresses and new information and evidence comes to light. The passage of time can increase the risk grading and this must not be overlooked.

The assessment of risk should be reviewed and monitored by a supervisory officer as soon as practicable after the report has been taken and then regularly monitored thereafter. It should then be reviewed at every point of handover and discussion, for example, at the beginning and end of each shift or at tactical tasking meetings.

If the case is managed by an individual or an investigation team and there is no handover, the risk level should be reviewed at intervals as determined by the nature of the case.

A supervisor should endorse any decision to vary the level of risk.

## Critical incidents and major investigations

Any incident in which the effectiveness of the police response is likely to have a significant impact on the confidence of the subject, their family and/or the community should be designated as a critical incident.

For further information on the management of critical incidents see [\*\*Critical incident management APP\*\*](#).

If, during the course of an investigation, it is deemed that the case is going to develop into a major enquiry, consideration should be given to moving the incident record to the relevant case management system (for example, HOLMES) see [\*\*Major investigation and public protection APP\*\*](#).

## Tags

Missing persons