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Estimation of risk for missing individuals: development of an empirical risk assessment tool for missing person investigations

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Developing an evidence-based, structured professional judgement risk assessment tool for missing person investigations.

Key details

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Police region	Scotland
Collaboration and partnership	This research is supported by Police Scotland and funded by Abertay University and the Scottish Institute for Policing Research (SIPR).
Level of research	PhD
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Date due for completion	September 2025

Research context

In the UK, an average of 891 missing person incidents are reported to the police daily (National Crime Agency (NCA), 2021). Although most missing persons are located safely within 48 hours, there were 955 fatal outcomes and over 6,500 non-fatal harm outcomes in 2019–20 (NCA, 2021).

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The police are faced with the complex task of determining which incidents are most likely to result in harm and where to appoint their resources. A vital aspect of this decision-making process is assessing the level of risk present in each case.

The current missing person risk assessment process adopts a professional judgement approach, where assessments are subjective and rely on police officers using their own knowledge and experience to assign cases into low, medium and high-risk categories (Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO), 2010; College of Policing, 2016). This common-sense approach to risk assessment can be susceptible to biases and inaccuracies, with risk assessments often varying based on service length and operational experience (Murray and Thomson, 2010).

The overall aim of this PhD project is to develop an evidence-based, structured professional judgement (SPJ) risk assessment tool for missing person investigations. The project consists of the following four stages.

1. A systematic literature review to identify risk factors within the existing literature that are associated with harm outcomes for missing adults and children.
2. Analysis of Police Scotland missing person cases to identify statistically significant risk factors associated with harm outcomes.
3. Survey of professionals working in a role relating to missing persons to explore their perspectives on what risk factors are the most important for assessing risk of harm in missing person cases.
4. Development of a novel SPJ tool for risk assessing missing person cases.

Research methodology

Stage one

Stage one involved a systematic literature review, with a total of 81 papers included in the final review.

Stage two

Phase 1 – The first phase of stage two involved the analysis of 21,476 missing person cases using a series of Pearson chi-square tests for association to explore what individual risk factors are statistically associated with these broad harm outcomes (traced alive or deceased).

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Phase 2 – The second phase of stage two involved a more in-depth analysis of a sub-sample of 2,507 missing person cases to identify risk factors statistically associated with specific harm outcomes (i.e., no harm, fatal harm and non-fatal harm).

Stage three

Stage three involved a mixed-method analysis (quantitative and qualitative) of survey responses from 79 professionals working in a role relating to missing persons to establish what risk factors they deemed to be the most important in the risk assessment of missing persons and explore their perspectives of the current risk assessment process for missing person investigations.

Tags

- Missing persons
- Risk