

Investigating missing children and adults: five things you need to know

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Learn how communications data such as WhatsApp and Snapchat can be used in missing person cases

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This article introduces five things to know when investigating missing persons, highlighting the differences to consider between missing children and missing adult investigations.

Legal compliance must be adhered to throughout an investigation. Continuous monitoring of social media profiles requires a directed surveillance authority (DSA), provided by the covert authorities bureau. Personal social media accounts should never be used to carry out research. Social media algorithms can link personal device accounts to the account you are researching, risking exposure. You should direct your enquiries towards departments with specific training in the areas of research you require.

1. Statistics

Over 170,000 people are reported missing each year in the UK, resulting in around 330,000 missing incidents for the police to respond to. Almost two thirds of these incidents relate to missing children (National Crime Agency (NCA) report, 2022-2023), who are at an increased risk of being victims of crime.

Worryingly, these numbers are likely to be lower than the true scale due to underreporting. It is estimated that 7 in 10 young people who have been sexually exploited have also been reported missing. A quick and effective response to missing person reports is crucial in safeguarding both children and adults (NCA, 2022-2023).

2. Reasons for going missing

Adults can go missing for a variety of reasons, including relationship breakdowns, debt, substance misuse or mental health issues. Domestic violence is a particularly concerning issue. It can cause vulnerable individuals to leave without informing anyone due to fears of being found by the perpetrator. Older adults may get lost or go missing accidentally due to health issues such as dementia.

Children can also go missing for different reasons, for example family issues at home, neglect, and abuse. Young people in the care system can feel isolated and displaced, prompting them to travel back to areas where they have friendships and familiarity. An increasing concern is child sexual exploitation (CSE), where young people can be coerced into travelling to unfamiliar areas.

3. Communication methods

Adults and children will use different communication methods. While traditional telephony work (phone calls and text messages) may quickly identify the whereabouts of a missing adult, call data records of a child may show very little activity.

Missing children often communicate through apps such as WhatsApp and Snapchat, which create both challenges and opportunities in locating them. It is important that early contact is made with the communications data investigation unit (CDIU) who can support with a digital strategy and the best use of available tactics.

4. Transport

The age of a missing person often dictates their mode of travel while they are missing. For those over the age of 17, consideration should be given to police system checks and enquiries with the family to determine if they have access to a personal or work vehicle. Automatic number plate recognition (ANPR) enquiries can be cross-referenced with cell site data to narrow down a search location.

Younger people often use public transport. Pre-purchased or free school travel cards make travel easily accessible. Local tram networks are popular during the late evenings due to reduced staffing levels, and should be incorporated into the search strategy.

5. Location

Children have less independence and can be reliant on friends for support during the time they are missing. Often, multiple missing children are located together. It is important to check if parents or guardians have any parental control over the missing child's devices, including GPS tracking.

Be mindful that many young people may not have contract mobile phones with large amounts of mobile data available. As a result, missing children will often seek out places that offer free wifi services. Local knowledge of fast-food restaurants and transport hubs which offer these services should form part of the investigation plan.

Due to the autonomy adults have in comparison to children, there may need to be a greater reliance on pattern analysis in locating them by combining communications data with CCTV, financial and ANPR data.

Adults may be in possession of multiple devices. Obtaining all available contact information for the missing person should be considered at the initial report-taking stage.

- This article was peer reviewed by Adam Watkinson, Detective Inspector, South Yorkshire Police

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