



No.17

# Research brief: Missing persons

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*Each year the Nation's police forces receive thousands of reports of missing persons. As this research brief indicates, most of these reports relate to young people under the age of seventeen. Many of these young people have run away from unbearable conditions of abuse and maltreatment at home. They are likely to gravitate to areas of our cities where a disturbing and growing number of homeless youth remain vulnerable to violence, drug addiction, prostitution and other risks of exploitation and involvement in crime.*

*Most missing people, of all ages, are eventually found - a tribute in many cases to the dedicated work of police officers or other voluntary workers who devote substantial resources and time to the search for those who are lost. But each year several hundred Australians remain unaccounted for after being reported missing.*

*What can be done to improve the situation? A number of initiatives are suggested in this research brief while those seeking more detailed information should refer to two earlier Institute reports - Missing Children and Missing Persons - listed in the references.*

**Duncan Chappell**

**Director**

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## Introduction

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The subject of missing persons is often raised during public debate in the context of particular cases, such as the three Beaumont children who disappeared in Adelaide on Australia Day 1966; ten-year-old Samantha Knight who disappeared from her Sydney home during 1986 or twenty-year-old Sharron Phillips who disappeared from a Brisbane suburb the same year. There is sometimes public discussion whether persons reported as missing are eventually located and how effective police were in searching for them. If the missing person is not located, as in the tragic cases just mentioned, conjecture and criticism often follow. However, if the missing young person or adult is found, relief and congratulations are usually forthcoming.

The reality of the missing person phenomenon lies not so much in the relatively few high-profile cases that capture newspaper headlines and electronic lenses from time to time (tragic though such cases often are), but more in the thousands of Australians who, by whatever criteria, are deemed missing each year. Fortunately, the great majority of those who are formally reported to police as missing are located within a short space of time,

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unharmful. There are, of course, those who are never found or who are, eventually, identified as victims of crime or misadventure. In addition, there is an unknown number of missing persons whose absences are never reported nor inquired into.

There are, in fact, many "unknowns" in the realm of missing persons, including ambiguities in terms of definitions and uncertainties as to what happens to people when they go missing.

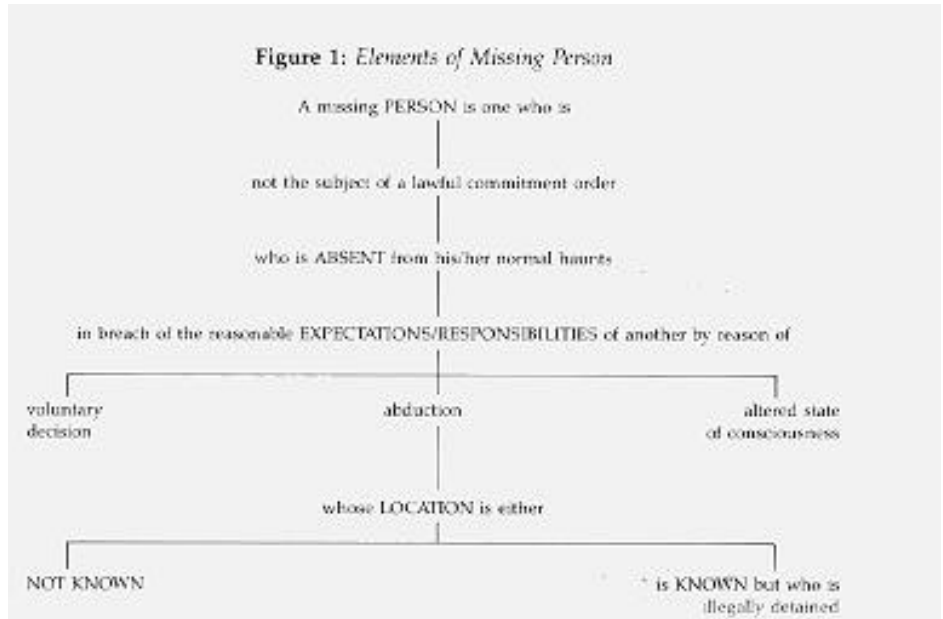
Developing public interest in missing persons and associated issues is evidenced by the Missing Persons Week held in Sydney during August 1988, public meetings held in Melbourne in June 1988 and the inquiry into the accommodation needs of homeless youth conducted by the Human Rights Commission during 1987 - 1988. The "Home Free" program sponsored by the Greyhound Bus Line and the Identikid campaign supported jointly by Lions International and Polaroid provide further evidence of corporate as well as public concern.

Partly with a view to broadening and informing public debate, the Australian Institute of Criminology reviewed the field, presenting the results in the two publications mentioned above. This edition of *Trends and Issues* touches on some of the questions addressed in those publications.

## Who is a Missing Person?

Definitions of missing persons vary considerably, there being no standard definition of the term. Thus, depending on one's perspective, "missing person" might include any or all of the following categories:

- lost person of sound mind;
- lost person of confused mind;
- abducted person;
- absent friend;
- runaway from unsatisfactory non-domestic situation;



- runaway from unsatisfactory non-domestic situation;
- institutional absconder.

Some of these primary categories possess subcategories. Thus, runaways can be subclassified according to age, gender and/or specific reason for absence, such as a juvenile running away from home due to dissatisfaction with his/her family's rule of discipline. Persons lost by reason of mental confusion may be subclassified according to whether their confusion is due to an organic condition (as in Alzheimer's disease or senility), emotional (as in memory loss), physical (concussion), or induced by medication.

Institutional absconders are persons accommodated in juvenile detention establishments or medical facilities for those suffering mental illness or notifiable diseases such as leprosy and TB, and who leave without being formally discharged.

Clearly, those agencies exercising responsibility for missing persons need to formulate precise operational definitions of the term in light of their particular responsibilities. The present authors offer a basic definition of a missing person which includes those categories of persons commonly considered "missing" while excluding those not realistically viewed as such, for example bushwalkers who lose their way.

**A missing person is one who, not being the subject of a lawful commitment order, is absent from his/her normal haunts in breach of the reasonable expectations and/or responsibilities of another by reason of abduction, altered state of consciousness or voluntary decision, and whose location is either not known or, if known, who is illegally detained.**

Figure 1 diagrammatically assists readers' comprehension of this necessarily comprehensive definition which excludes persons who are merely physically lost or who are the focus of inquiries by friends or relatives concerned to resume relationships broken over preceding years. On the other hand, it does include persons who are victims of crime, such as persons who have been picked up at a roadside by offenders and taken to a secluded place and murdered. Initially, parents, who for example, report such a matter as a missing person, may be unaware at the time of all the facts. Subsequently, when the body is found, the status changes officially from missing person to crime victim.

## Who Traces Missing Persons?

Anyone can search for missing persons: friends; family members;

volunteers; private investigators; charity and welfare organisations. Police, however, undertake the great bulk of missing persons traces in all jurisdictions.

Police definitions of missing persons vary slightly between jurisdictions, but all agencies accept cases involving juveniles, cases involving crime or suspected crime and all cases in which a subject is placed at risk, i.e. is vulnerable to harm whether criminally inspired or not.

In cases requiring great discretion, persons possessing sufficient funds tend to hire private investigators to conduct traces. Private traces frequently concern deserting spouses and debtors. The number of privately conducted traces is unknown, and while undoubtedly small, relative to the number of inquiries conducted by police, the number is thought to be substantial. The Salvation Army conducts a well-known tracing service, internationally as well as inter-state, on behalf of friends and relatives in respect of persons aged eighteen years and over. The International Red Cross also conducts searches for persons, especially for those missing following natural and man-made disasters. Public demand for "absent friend" type inquiries is massive and the resources of volunteer welfare agencies addressing this need are stretched to the limit.

### How Many People Go Missing?

The total numbers of persons who go missing each year are unknown. This is understandable when one considers the lack of standard definition of the term, that many persons who go missing are not reported to police, and that some persons go missing several times within a twelve-month period. Many consider absent friends and relatives are not bona fide missing persons and yet most police agencies undertake a limited range of inquiries in respect of

Table 1 Adult and juvenile missing person reports\* by state, 1985

	Adults			Juveniles		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
NSW	492	329	821	na	na	1918
VIC	975	746	1721	1821	2062	3883
QLD	491	323	814	969	997	1966
WA	286	203	489	621	779	1400
SA	888	825	1713	1167	1126	2293
TAS	51	39	90	101	130	231

Source: Police departments.

\* exclusive of those absenting themselves from juvenile detention and some health facilities without formal authority.

same and include them in their annual reports as missing person traces together with reports of lost persons.

Bearing in mind such complications, the most comprehensive national data available are those provided by police. In calendar year 1985 (1986 in the case of Victoria) nearly 24,000 missing person reports (including institutional absconders) were recorded throughout the six states. Of that number, almost 13,000 were male and nearly 11,000 were female. Overall there were some 7,000 adults and almost 17,000 juveniles. Figures for non-institutional absconders are tabulated by state in Table 1.

Interstate comparisons have to be made with caution as varying definitions and different reporting systems in each jurisdiction do not produce strictly comparable data.

Location rates are high in all jurisdictions, although each state has a number of long-term missing persons on its list. Sometimes evidence of such people only comes to light when their remains are found in the bush or in coastal waters. A proportion of such persons will have died from natural causes, accident or suicide, whereas others will have been victims of crime.

There is a total of approximately 250 persons outstanding on state police missing persons files at any one time, exclusive of long-term missing persons and institutional absconders.

It is difficult to discuss missing persons as a "problem". As a social phenomenon the topic possesses numerous facets and degrees of public concern according to the case considered. In no state is the number of missing persons reports handled by

police perceived as constituting a major problem, although the energy of police in the conduct of certain inquiries has been the cause for bitter complaint from time to time. However, the preponderance of juvenile missing persons reports in all states leads to a consideration of serious social problems such as accommodation for homeless youth and crime committed by juveniles to support themselves while away from home. These matters are dealt with in *Missing Persons*.

### How Do Police Organise to Trace Missing Persons?

Administrative and operational arrangements concerning missing persons vary from state to state. All police agencies maintain some form of central index of missing persons. Sometimes that registry may be located within a missing persons unit, as is the case in New South Wales and Victoria. Elsewhere it may be located within an Information Bureau, as in Queensland and Tasmania.

Some missing persons units are both administrative and operational as in the cases of Western Australia, South Australia and the Northern Territory. In New South Wales, the Missing Persons Bureau conducts certain inquiries in the metropolitan area but principal operational authority rests with local police. In Victoria, on the other hand, the Bureau is entirely administrative. Variations also occur, as in Queensland, where local police possess operational responsibility but specialised personnel placed in the Juvenile Aid Bureau possess a wide

brief with regard to missing juveniles and at risk adults generally. In Perth and Darwin, Missing Persons personnel generally conduct metropolitan inquiries. In the ACT, operational police are responsible for all missing person inquiries.

Some cases are not accepted for inquiry by police, cases principally concern reports involving divorce and private prosecutions. Reports of adults walking away from unsatisfactory relationships under circumstances in which no risk is apparent are not accepted either in some jurisdictions.

In general, then, investigation of missing persons reports is undertaken by local police, although specialist missing person investigators operate in some jurisdictions. Of course, where foul play is suspected, detectives will take over an investigation.

In cases in which it is thought a missing person may have, either voluntarily or involuntarily located to another jurisdiction, police agencies communicate with each other by telephone, radio, telex and letter, as appropriate. All traces not concluded within a defined period are notified to other police agencies if this information has not been already so communicated.

There is no single "best" way to organise staff to conduct missing persons inquiries. The variety of approaches adopted by police is evidence of this fact. The key factor in tracing missing persons is the calibre of personnel employed, their knowledge of procedures as well as their capacity to comply with procedures, and their exercise of commonsense.

Some police officers consider a central missing persons register would be of assistance in traces involving interstate movement. However, it is not clear whether such an arrangement would be cost effective. The matter could be referred to the office of National Exchange of Police Information by police agencies for investigation by that office.

## What Risk Criteria Should Police Adopt in Respect of Missing Person Reports?

It is important for police to accurately assess the degree of risk associated with any person reported as missing. This is a far from simple task. Sometimes persons who report others as missing have absolutely no idea if an immediate element of risk exists. On the other hand, certain categories of missing person can be assumed to be at risk by virtue of their incapacity to protect themselves. Such categories include elderly people, young children and the mentally and physically handicapped.

Sometimes no significant risk to the missing person will be known of or suspected, but a reporter might nevertheless claim a degree of risk in order to maximise the probability of a speedy police response. Experience in some cases suggests the only way police can be sure of responding without placing missing persons at greater risk is to treat all missing person reports as urgent. However, such a policy would inevitably lead to considerable waste of resources given that most people return unharmed to their normal environment, of their own accord, within three days.

Police officers throughout Australia apply formal and informal risk criteria in assessing responses to missing persons reports. Some formal criteria are better articulated than others, but there is room for improvement generally with regard to both the substance and application of such criteria. The number of cases in which police assessments have proven inadequate, with tragic results, lends testimony to the fact. Police officers are generally opposed to a mandatory requirement that they treat all missing persons reports as urgent, and claim they are better qualified to assess risk than are friends or next of kin of the missing person. The resource problems associated with mandating an urgent response in respect of all missing persons reports are enormous.

One alternative is to improve police risk assessment criteria. The following criteria, compiled by the US National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (slightly modified here), provide a checklist for police officers receiving missing persons reports. In the event of any one criterion being matched by the circumstances of a report, a greater than routine response would be indicated. Responses in such cases could be either "urgent" or graduated according to assessed seriousness:

- A missing person fifteen years of age or younger.
- A missing person believed to be out of the range of safety appropriate to his/her mental age.
- A missing person who is physically or mentally incapacitated.
- A missing person who is drug or medication dependent.
- A missing person who is a possible victim of foul play or sexual exploitation.
- A missing person who might be in a dangerous physical or social environment.
- A missing person who has been absent twenty-four hours before being reported.
- A missing youth believed to be in company of adult(s) likely to endanger the welfare of minors.
- A missing person considered likely to resort to crime either to maintain life or obtain drugs.
- A missing person whose absence is a significant departure from established patterns which cannot be explained.

Even these detailed criteria leave scope for dispute between those reporting persons as missing and police officers receiving such reports. For example, who determines the possibility of foul play? Should it be the person reporting or the police officer? Thus, any protocol developed on the basis of these or similar criteria would need to specify the party whose judgment should prevail in those

situations in which competing interpretations of circumstances occur.

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### **To What Agencies or Persons Can One Turn to for Help Should a Relative or Friend be Missing?**

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The nature of assistance one might require would obviously depend on circumstances. If a friend has not returned from a bushwalk (provided lost persons are operationally defined as missing persons), contact with police and State Emergency Services is clearly indicated. If an elderly relative has wandered away from a geriatric institution, police would be the appropriate agency to call on for assistance. If one requires help in coping with the emotional consequences of a child running away from home, a counselling agency such as Parents of Missing Children ((03) 9329 0300 (24 hours) or 9326 8522(offices)) might be the most useful resource to turn to. Detailed lists of support agencies in all states and territories are provided in the Australian Institute of Criminology's publications *Missing Children* and *Missing Persons*.

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### **What can be done to improve the situation?**

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There are numerous initiatives that can be undertaken to improve the tracing of missing persons as well as improve the lot of those who run away from home. These matters, for future consideration, are discussed in greater detail in *Missing Persons*. The degree of relevance and urgency associated with such matters varies markedly from state to state.

Some of the more obvious initiatives include:

- improved operational definitions of missing persons by those agencies concerned with this issue;
- improved classifications of missing persons' categories, e.g. memory loss, runaway, debt jumper;
- improved risk assessment criteria by police agencies;
- conducting feasibility studies in east coast states concerning the appropriateness and effectiveness of missing person support and information centres;
- encouraging both print and electronic media to undertake missing persons presentations.

Father Brian Jones, who was responsible for the August 1988 Missing Persons week in Sydney as well as a number of memorial services across the country, chaired a steering committee in New South Wales designed to pursue these and other initiatives. In 1988, he could be contacted at: 3 Cantrell Street, Yagoona, NSW 2199. The Australian Institute of Criminology will monitor the initiatives of both police departments and voluntary agencies in the area of missing persons in the future.

### *Further Reading*

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- The authors express their appreciation to all who critiqued an earlier draft of this document.



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