Missing children: who cares?

The police response to missing and absent children

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Foreword

Each year thousands of children go missing from their homes. The majority of them will return, or be found soon after they have been reported missing. There are many reasons why children go missing. On very rare occasions they may be abducted. All children who go missing are potentially at risk of harm, and a significant number, because of their circumstances, will face the risk of sexual, criminal or economic exploitation.

Although not every child who goes missing is at risk of sexual exploitation and not every child who is at risk of sexual exploitation goes missing, the two are inter-linked. It is often the most vulnerable children who are sexually exploited, and who are targeted by those who intend to commit crimes against them. These children may have been abused or neglected, lack affection or have already experienced trauma in their lives. A number will be in the care of the local authority because of serious concerns about their wellbeing or the risks they face.

Responding to missing incidents places a high demand on police time. Managing this demand is a major challenge for police forces but the consequences of not investigating cases can be extremely serious, leaving some children at risk of exploitation and/or significant harm. Effective outcomes in police responses to children at risk of abuse require specific skills and knowledge and excellent partnership working, in particular with children's social services. But more than this, effective outcomes rely on recognition, by all in the police service, that children are inherently vulnerable by virtue of their age, and that those who come into contact with police for any reason are often the most vulnerable.

As the Chief Inspector of Constabulary observed in his recent State of Policing report,[1] the work of the police in child protection is probably the most onerous and demanding of all police work, and it is the most important simply because children have the most to lose. Recent revelations about the scale of child sexual abuse, whether online or involving high-profile individuals, institutions or local communities, have presented the police with a complex challenge. Many crimes go unreported and those who are vulnerable often have greater difficulty in bringing their concerns to the attention of those who are able to help them. In its protective and preventative role, the police service has the responsibility to root out crime and the circumstances in which it may be committed, particularly where the victim is vulnerable, afraid or actively prevented from seeking help.

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[1] *State of Policing: The Annual Assessment of Policing in England and Wales 2015, HMIC, London, February 2016. Available from:* www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmic/publications/state-of-policing-the-annual-assessment-of-policing-in-england-and-wales-2015/

Our inspections in relation to missing and absent children have found some good approaches with prompt action to find missing children and joint work to protect them. However, our principal finding was of inconsistencies in properly assessing risks, managing investigations, and providing support and help to the child. Consequently, our conclusion must be that this is leaving some children at unacceptable risk of harm.

This report focuses on the experiences and outcomes of police contact for children who go missing. For the first time, we publish findings from HMIC-commissioned research on children's experiences of police contact. While we found clear evidence of positive experiences and outcomes for some children, we found a weighting towards negative experiences in the majority of cases. In particular, we found evidence of some police officers' negative attitudes towards missing children, which determines their responses, and in turn undermines children's confidence in the police service as a source of protection and help. These findings signal an imperative for cultural change in the police service if children and young people who run away from home or care are to have trust that the police will help them, and if the police are to be better able to afford them that protection.

Wendy Williams

HM Inspector of Constabulary

Summary

Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) inspected the police response to missing and absent children as part of its summer 2015 PEEL (police effectiveness, efficiency and legitimacy) effectiveness inspection of all 43 police forces in England and Wales. As part of this work, we also assessed forces' preparedness to tackle child sexual exploitation, because children who go missing are at greater risk of becoming a victim of this kind of offending[2] (with those missing from local authority care being particularly vulnerable).[3]

This report sets out what we found, with additional evidence from:

- other child protection inspections HMIC carried out from 2014 to 2016; and

- research HMIC commissioned from the University of Bedfordshire to explore the experiences of 45 children who had come into contact with the police because of concerns about their safety or well being.[4]

When the police receive a report that a child is missing, they can choose to categorise him or her using the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) definitions of 'missing' or 'absent'.[5] This determines the level and urgency of the response:

- a categorisation of absent denotes that the child is considered to be at 'no apparent risk'. This normally means that the force takes no immediate action, but should keep the case under review; while

- cases in the 'missing' category receive an active police response, with the level of this response determined by a further assessment of whether there is a low, medium or high risk of immediate harm.

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[2] As is set out later in this report (see page 15), without work or state benefits, children are dependent on others for food and shelter, which makes them vulnerable to criminal, labour or sexual exploitation.

[3] See page 27 for more information on this link.

[4] Further detail of the research methodology is set out in Annex A. The research, titled *Children's Voices*, is available from: www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmic/publications/missing-children-who-cares

[5] However, not all forces use the ACPO-issued definitions of 'missing' and 'absent'. Some forces have created their own definitions, and some forces do not use the 'absent' category for children, and record all incidents as 'missing'. The current guidance for police was issued in 2010 by the Association of Chief Police Officers. In April 2015 ACPO was superseded by the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC). See chapter two for more information on definitions of 'missing' and 'absent'.

Findings

Pockets of good practice

Responding to reports of missing or absent children is seldom easy, and frequently complicated and time-consuming. We were therefore pleased to find examples of committed police officers and staff providing an excellent, empathetic and effective response to reports of a missing child. These included:

- accurate and comprehensive analyses of the risks that children may face;

- quick and targeted responses;

- working well with partners to help protect children; and

- a sympathetic and approachable manner, to ensure children are safe, and to try and prevent future absences.

> "And this police officer rang me, he went "You're a cheeky monkey, you aren't you? Telling us you're on your way home and you didn't go home",...he was like "Where are you?" I said "I'm on my way home now, I'm on the bus", so then this police officer come to my house …He were like a nice police officer because of the way he was with me, we were having a laugh."
> (16-year-old girl)

Most forces have also introduced dedicated officers to respond to cases involving missing and absent people,[6] although few have yet evaluated the impact of these new posts.

However, we also found widespread inconsistencies and shortcomings across all aspects of the response.

Serious inconsistencies in the way that forces use the 'missing' and 'absent' categories are leaving some children at risk of serious harm

Although the majority of forces use the ACPO-issued definitions of 'missing' and 'absent',[7] forces interpret the definitions differently:

- a small number of forces do not use the term 'absent' for children;

- some categorise all those who go missing below a certain age as 'missing', regardless of the circumstances; while

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[6] Although these officers' responsibility covers both adults and children – not specifically children – this report looks at how forces handle missing and absent children.

[7] The current guidance for police was issued in 2010 by the Association of Chief Police Officers. In April 2015, ACPO was superseded by the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC).

- other forces only use the category 'absent' for children in care homes and looked after by the local authority.

As a result, we found a wide variation between forces in the percentage of children classified as absent as opposed to missing.

This is not just a technical point. These inconsistencies matter:

- we found examples of forces categorising some children as absent – sometimes in contradiction of the force's own policies – when the risk they faced clearly meant that they needed an immediate response, and so should have been categorised as missing. As a result, cases are not being handled with the right level of urgency, leaving children at risk of harm;

- data sets at force level, and national level, are not reliable and so cannot provide a full understanding of the nature and extent of missing incidents or their seriousness. It is therefore impossible to know how many children in England and Wales go missing, how often, or how many of these might be at risk of child sexual exploitation or other exploitation or abuse;

- most forces do not have a good understanding of the nature and scale of the problem in their area. The effect this can have on the experience of the child is significant, with failures by the police to respond appropriately, based on good knowledge of the circumstances, often meaning that children do not receive the correct support;

- the length of time a child has been missing before he or she is categorised as missing 'long term' also varies considerably, from between 24 hours to 6 months; and

- some forces do not have a set definition for 'long term' missing at all.

This is clearly unacceptable, and we make several recommendations aimed at rectifying this situation.

Children who are clearly at great risk of immediate harm generally receive a good response; but incorrect risk assessments for some children are leaving them at risk of harm

Many risk assessments that HMIC saw during our PEEL and child protection inspections were clear, comprehensive and properly acted upon. In particular, if a child was clearly at great risk of immediate harm (because he or she is very young, for instance, or has a history of self-harm), the assessment and follow-up was generally good. However, if a case is not assessed as urgent, action was often minimal, despite the fact that the longer term risk may remain both high and unaddressed.

We also found cases where police underestimated the risk facing a child. Forces' underestimation of risk was often linked to a failure to take sufficient account of the likelihood of child sexual exploitation or other harm, and/or the frequency and reasons for any previous missing episodes.

Finally, the *Children's Voices* research carried out by the University of Bedfordshire highlighted concerns expressed by children around the police returning them to their homes, without considering the risk of harm they may face there (which in some cases was why they ran away in the first place).

There is some good evidence of support and help for missing children through partnership working; but this was inconsistent, with crucial information sometimes not shared

Children who go missing from home or care are not solely the responsibility of the police: the Government's statutory guidance requires an inter-agency approach to prevent children from going missing and to protect them when they do. It is important to consider our findings in this context. While the police have a major role in finding children who go missing, protecting them from harm and investigating any offences that may have been committed against them, other agencies, such as children's social care services, have an equally, if not in some instances more, important role to play, and it is only through partner agencies effectively working together that outcomes for missing children will be improved.

We saw evidence of positive approaches to partnership working; however, we also found limited long-term multi-agency planning in a number of cases. We also found examples of children in foster care or care homes who frequently went missing, who had either no, or poor quality, multi-agency action plans in place to protect them in the longer term. 'Return to home' interviews (which are the responsibility of the local authority) to assess why a child went missing, and so enable the local authority and police to put in place 'trigger' plans to prevent it happening again) were not consistently carried out.

Problems with sharing information often exacerbated this problem. The police are not always advised when children are placed from another local authority area into care homes in their force area, which presents a significant challenge when they begin investigating the whereabouts of the child. It is also common for officers on the front line not to be made aware of children missing within their patrol areas.

It is essential that the police improve how they work with partner agencies in responding to missing and absent children. More than half of the children in the *Children's Voices* research that the University of Bedfordshire carried out believed that the best course of action the police had taken was to put them in touch with specialist individuals and agencies.

Attitudes towards children who go missing are sometimes unacceptable

In cases where a child does not want to be found, is repeatedly going missing and does not want to speak to the police, it is perhaps understandable for officers to become frustrated and see the child as a time waster rather than a vulnerable child in need of help. But such a response is clearly potentially damaging. The *Children's Voices* report found that children who were dealt with well and sympathetically were more willing to interact positively and talk to the police. Being able to encourage children to disclose the reasons they have run away is of course important in being able to determine whether there will be any risk of harm to them if they are returned home.

Conclusion

Our inspection found unacceptable inconsistencies between and within forces, across all aspects of the approach to missing children, whether in respect of assessing risks, investigating or supporting children. This was echoed in our interviews with children, many of whom described how their experiences of the police varied, depending in some cases on which officers within the same force had contact with them.

These inconsistencies are leaving children unprotected, and at risk of serious harm. There must therefore be both operational and cultural changes in the police service if children and young people, particularly those whose safety or wellbeing is threatened to such extent that they decide to run away from care or home, are to have confidence in the police as a source of help and protection.

Going missing can be the precursor to various aspects of significant harm, such as abuse, criminal activity or mental ill-health, which can blight a child's life well into adulthood. Forces need to understand how both the moral and financial imperatives of being proactive in preventing missing incidents, both as a means of reducing future demands on their services, and of promoting better safety and well being in society to prevent exploitation and abuse in future.

We make a series of recommendations for the Home Office, National Police Chiefs' Council, chief constables and the College of Policing, aimed at ensuring the necessary improvements are made – and quickly.

1.   Introduction

Going missing is an indicator that a child might be in great danger. In recent years, awareness of the risks to which missing children may be exposed has been given increasing prominence on the political and public agenda. This is evident, in particular, from the findings of the Parliamentary inquiry into children going missing from care,[8] the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Rotherham (1997 – 2013)[9] and the establishment of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults.[10]

Children may run away from a problem, such as abuse or neglect at home, or to somewhere they want to be. They may have been coerced to run away by someone else. Whatever the reason, it is thought that approximately 25 percent of children and young people who go missing overnight are at risk of serious harm.[11] In addition to the particular concerns about the links between children running away and the risks of sexual exploitation, missing children may be vulnerable to other forms of exploitation, violent crime, or to drug and alcohol misuse.[12]

Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) inspected the police response to missing and absent children as part of the vulnerability strand of its police effectiveness, efficiency and legitimacy (PEEL) inspections in summer 2015. These inspections included an assessment of forces' preparedness to tackle child sexual exploitation (CSE). We published our findings about the performance of each police

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[8] *Report from the joint inquiry into children who go missing from care*, published jointly by the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults and the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Looked After Children and Care Leavers, June 2012. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/175563/Report_-_children_who_go_missing_from_care.pdf

[9] *Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Rotherham (1997-2013)*, Jay A, August 2014. Available at: www.rotherham.gov.uk/downloads/file/1407/independent_inquiry_cse_in_rotherham

[10] The All-Party Parliamentary Group for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults was established in 2013. More information is available from: www.childrenssociety.org.uk/what-we-do/policy-and-lobbying/all-party-parliamentary-group-for-runaway-and-missing-children-and

[11] *Still Running 3: early findings from our third national survey of young runaways*, Rees G, The Children's Society, 2011. Available at: www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/tcs/u32/still-running_3_report.pdf

[12] *Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care,* Department for Education, January 2014. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/307867/Statutory_Guidance_-_Missing_from_care__3_.pdf

force in England and Wales in our *PEEL: Police effectiveness 2015 (vulnerability)*[13] in December 2015. At the same time, we published our national overview report on the police response to vulnerability, including HMIC's summary findings on missing and absent children and forces' preparedness to tackle CSE.[14]

This thematic report provides the background for these findings and focuses particularly on information available to HMIC about the outcomes of police contact with children who go missing from home or care, and the links to children at risk of sexual exploitation.

Approach

This report draws on evidence available to HMIC from inspection activity, commissioned research and other national sources of data to assess the experiences and outcomes of police contact with children who go missing. In particular we have considered:

- Evidence collected during HMIC's 2015 annual PEEL inspection of all forces. These inspections included consideration of how well police forces understand CSE and the risks associated with children going missing, and the measures they have in place to identify those at risk and to respond to concerns appropriately. Quantitative data from all 43 forces was analysed and a number of case examples from police records were examined.

- Findings from eleven child protection inspections and eight re-visits, undertaken as part of HMIC's National Child Protection Inspection programme in 2014 and 2015. These reports addressed the quality of police practice with children at risk of abuse and neglect, including children who go missing and children at risk of CSE.[15]

- Research by the University of Bedfordshire, commissioned by HMIC that explores the experiences of young people in England or Wales who have come into contact with the police because of concerns about their safety or

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[13] The individual force inspection reports from the vulnerability strand of HMIC's 2015 effectiveness inspections are available from: www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmic/publications/police-effectiveness-vulnerability-2015/

[14] The individual force inspection reports from the vulnerability strand of HMIC's 2015 effectiveness inspections are available from: www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmic/publications/police-effectiveness-vulnerability-2015/

[15] More information on the National Child Protection Inspections, together with all inspection reports, is available from www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmic/our-work/child-abuse-and-child-protection-issues/national-child-protection-inspection/

wellbeing.[16] Although this work was not commissioned specifically to focus on the experiences of children who had gone missing, we found that the police contact for just under half of the sample (21 children out of 45) related to going missing. Further information about this research is set out in Annex A. We refer to this work throughout the report as our *Children's Voices* project.

Other relevant HMIC inspections over the past 18 months, in particular:

- a national thematic inspection on online CSE;[17] and

- an overview thematic report of all HMIC inspection reports relating to vulnerable children published in July 2015.[18]

HMIC has consulted with experts in the field through our membership of a national oversight group for missing persons, chaired by the national policing lead for this area of police work (Wiltshire Police's Chief Constable, Mike Veale). This group includes representation from the National Crime Agency (host to the UK Missing Persons Bureau), and the Children's Society which, along with the charity Missing People provides the secretariat to the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults. HMIC is grateful to both the National Crime Agency (NCA) and the Children's Society for their cooperation and support in developing our understanding of the nationally available data on missing children.

When inspecting police forces in respect of their child protection responsibilities, HMIC expects to find evidence that forces:

- recognise, understand and respond to child vulnerability appropriately;

- will work as a sole agency and with other agencies as appropriate to safeguard children's wellbeing;

- treat with respect and listen to everyone;

- investigate offences;

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[16] The University of Bedfordshire's International Centre researches child sexual exploitation, violence and trafficking. The International Centre's *Children's Voices* research is available from HMIC's website: www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmic/publications/missing-children-who-cares

[17] *Online and on the edge: Real risks in a virtual world. An inspection into how forces investigate online child sexual exploitation*, HMIC, July 2015. Available at: www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmic/wp-content/uploads/online-and-on-the-edge.pdf

[18] *In harm's way: the role of the police in keeping children safe*, HMIC, July 2014. Available at: www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmic/wp-content/uploads/in-harms-way.pdf

- protect children at risk; and

- identify and prosecute perpetrators or place controls on their behaviour where appropriate.

About this report

Chapter two sets the context for police work with missing children. It provides information from research on understanding missing children and the links with child sexual exploitation, and describes the police role in safeguarding children as set out in the law, national policy and guidance.

Chapter three considers the scale of the problem, drawing on data collected by HMIC for its PEEL vulnerability inspections and by the NCA in its annual data collection.

Chapters four and five consider our evidence on the experiences, progress and outcomes for children who go missing.

Chapter six sets out our conclusions and recommendations.

2. The context of police work with children who are missing

Understanding missing and absent children

There is a wide range of circumstances in which a child might be 'missing'. A child may be missing for short periods if they are lost or separated from their parents, such as when out shopping. Very rarely, a child might be abducted by a stranger or be abducted by a parent, usually following parental separation where a relationship has broken down. Some children run away from home, intending this to be permanent, while others go missing for hours or days but return home eventually. Some children are 'pushed out' of the family home while others, for example refugee or trafficked children, may 'disappear' from a care home under the instructions of their trafficker or minder, or may have escaped from being trafficked but have nowhere to go. The police also come across children who are 'missing', in the sense that their parents or carers do not know their whereabouts or when they can be expected to return but they have not been reported as missing.[19]

Fortunately, the complete disappearance of a child or the murder of an abducted child is an extremely rare occurrence. Most of the cases responded to by the police, and most of the cases examined in HMIC's inspection processes, relate to children who go missing but return home eventually, usually of their own accord. Some may not have even been reported missing.

However, many children who go missing are at risk. Without work or state benefits they are dependent on others for food and shelter and can be vulnerable to criminal, labour or sexual exploitation. Frequent missing episodes are associated with sexual exploitation, trafficking, involvement in gangs or criminality.[20]

A one-day survey undertaken by the University of Bedfordshire in 2011 found that over half of all children using CSE support services in England were known to have gone missing, a quarter of them more than 10 times. Just over a fifth of service users were in care.[21]

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[19] The Children Society estimates that 30 percent of children who run away come to the attention of the police. *Still Running 3: early findings from our third national survey of young runaways*, Rees G, The Children's Society, 2011, page 19. Available at: www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/tcs/u32/still-running_3_report.pdf

[20] *Running the Risks: The links between gang involvement and young people going missing,* Catch 22, July 2015. Available at: www.catch-22.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Catch22-Dawes-Unit-Running-The-Risks-full-report.pdf

[21] *What's going on – to Safeguard Children and Young People from Sexual Exploitation? How local partnerships respond to child sexual exploitation*, University of Bedfordshire, October 2011. Available at: www.beds.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/121873/wgoreport2011-121011.pdf

Police forces in England and Wales are increasingly aware that some children may run away as a means of dealing with problems, sometimes compulsively, while others may be either under duress or under the influence of an exploitative relationship. In these circumstances, each unchallenged missing episode can further entrench a pattern of behaviour or encourage abusers to continue in their activities, increasing the potential risk to that child.

The police role in safeguarding children – the law, national policy and guidance

The police have a duty to investigate crime and bring offenders to justice. They also have an important role in public protection.

The law

The main pieces of legislation which underpin work relating to children who go missing are:

- Children Act 1989[22]

  Under section 46 of the Children Act 1989 the police are given emergency powers to enter premises and remove a child to ensure their immediate protection. A local authority will also often require the assistance of the police in carrying out its own duties, such as those to protect a child 'in need' under section 17, and making enquiries to safeguard and secure the welfare of any child in the area who is suffering, or is likely to suffer, significant harm under section 47.

- Children Act 2004[23]

  Section 11 of the Children Act 2004 places duties on a range of organisations and individuals to make arrangements to ensure that their functions are discharged, having regard to the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of children. The principal organisations which are covered by these duties include, but are not limited to:

  - local authorities

  - the police

  - NHS bodies

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[22] Children Act 1989, HM Government, 1989. Available at: www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1989/41/contents

[23] Children Act 2004, HM Government, 2004. Available at: www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2004/31/contents

- National Probation Service

- Youth Offending Teams

Statutory guidance

Statutory government guidance outlines how these legal duties and responsibilities should be exercised.[24] The specified police roles set out in the guidance relate to:

- the identification of children who might be at risk of abuse and neglect;

- the investigation of alleged offences against children;

- inter-agency working and information sharing to protect children; and

- taking emergency powers to protect children.

In 2014 the Department for Education issued statutory guidance to local authorities on children who go missing from care or care homes.[25] This guidance sets out the steps local authorities and their partners (including police) should take to prevent children from going missing and to protect them when they do go missing. Under this guidance, the police have responsibilities to work with other agencies on a case-by-case basis and at a senior level as members of Local Safeguarding Children's Boards (LSCBs), which are established under section 13 of the Children Act 2004. LSCBs should have a local Runaway and Missing From Home and Care (RMFHC) protocol and should regularly receive and review information about children who go missing.

Local RMFHC protocols should include agreement on:

- the roles and responsibilities of lead people within agencies;

- assessment of risk in individual cases, and action required;

- a list of measures to ensure that police 'missing' and 'absent' definitions are applied to children with due consideration given to their age, vulnerability and developmental factors;

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[24] *Working Together to Safeguard Children: a guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children*, HM Government, March 2015. Available from:www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/419595/Working_Together_to_Safeguard_Children.pdf

[25] *Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care,* Department for Education, January 2014. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/307867/Statutory_Guidance_-_Missing_from_care__3_.pdf

- how agencies will respond to particularly vulnerable groups such as children with learning difficulties or children who may have been trafficked;

- provision of family support;

- checks to establish the safety and wellbeing of a returnee or to take protective or other action if they have been harmed; and,

- independent return interviews establish why the child went missing and what might need to be done to prevent reoccurrence or to keep the child safe in future.

It is expected that when a child is missing from local authority care, the local authority or the child's carers will make initial enquiries as to his or her whereabouts. Police and social care services should work together to assess the risk in cases of children missing from home or care and to analyse information to learn from incidents and reduce their reoccurrence.

According to the guidance, a missing child incident would be prioritised as 'high risk' where the:

- risk posed is immediate and there are substantial grounds for believing that the child is in danger through his or her own vulnerability; or

- child may have been the victim of a serious crime; or

- risk posed is immediate and there are substantial grounds for believing that the public is in danger.

If the police use their powers to remove a missing child to a place of safety, the child should be transferred to local authority accommodation as soon as possible.

In Wales, the *All-Wales Protocol: Missing Children*,[26] introduced in 2011, provides guidance to professionals working with children and young people who go missing and are either living within their families or who are looked after by the local authority. This guidance includes a category of 'unauthorised absence', in addition to 'missing', relating to children who are looked after by a local authority. This additional definition directs that, subject to an appropriate risk assessment, children who are missing for less than six hours or before midnight are not routinely reported to police as missing. Any incidents exceeding these periods, or where a risk assessment determines that the risk is high, are reported to the police as missing.

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[26] All Wales Protocol: Missing Children, All Wales Child Protection Procedures Review Group, June 2011. Available at: www.childreninwales.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/All-Wales-Protocol-Missing-Children.pdf

Police guidance

In discharging their responsibilities, police forces also have recourse to guidance issued by the professional body for policing – the College of Policing – and contained within Authorised Professional Practice (APP). The College of Policing issues APP as the official source of professional practice on policing. The APP on missing people is under development by the College of Policing which carried out a consultation exercise during 2015. At the time of writing, a publication date has yet to be confirmed. The current guidance for police was issued in 2010 by the Association of Chief Police Officers[27] (in April 2015 ACPO was superseded by the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC)).

In 2013, ACPO introduced a change in its approach to missing persons which resulted in an additional category of 'absent' being used for some people who go missing. This change resulted in amended guidance for police forces being published in April 2013 for dealing with people who go missing.[28] ACPO issued a further clarification to the 'absent' definition in March 2015, which ensured that the phrase "and there is no apparent risk" was included in the definition.[29]

The NPCC definitions (issued by ACPO) used are currently:

- Missing – "Anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established and where the circumstances are out of character or the context suggests the person may be the subject of a crime or at risk of harm to themselves or another."

- Absent – "A person not at a place where they are expected or required to be and there is no apparent risk." 'Absent' cases should not be ignored, and must be monitored over periods of time with consideration given to escalating to 'missing' if there is a change in circumstances that has increased the level of risk.

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[27] *Guidance on the Management, Recording and Investigation of Missing Persons 2010*, Association of Chief Police Officers, 2010, second edition. Available at:
http://library.college.police.uk/docs/npia/missing-persons-guidance-2010.pdf

[28] *Interim Guidance on the Management, Recording and Investigation of Missing Persons 2013,* Association of Chief Police Officers, 2010. Available at: http://library.college.police.uk/docs/college-of-policing/Interim-Missing-Persons-Guidance-2013.pdf

[29] Changes to the definition of "Absent" & other matters, Chief Constable Patrick Geenty, March 2015. Available at: http://library.college.police.uk/docs/appref/ACPO-Absent-letter-March-2015.pdf

Links between missing and absent children and CSE

Research shows that there are specific concerns about the links between children who go missing and the risks of sexual exploitation. Studies in 2012 by the University of Bedfordshire and the Office of the Children's Commissioner (OCC)[30] found that CSE is much more prevalent than previously thought.

Children looked after by local authorities who go missing from their placements are particularly vulnerable. In 2012, two reports highlighted that many of these children were not being effectively safeguarded: the APPG Inquiry on Children who Go Missing from Care;[31] and the accelerated report of the OCC's ongoing inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Gangs and Groups.[32]

Other studies have suggested that a quarter of children and young people missing from home or care overnight are at risk of serious harm.[33] In the study 'Off the Radar' a fifth of missing children were identified as having been sexually exploited.[34]

Although there is no specific offence of CSE in law, there are numerous offences which can be prosecuted under the Sexual Offences Act 2003. This Act introduced a range of offences that recognised the grooming, coercion and control of children.[35]

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[30] "I thought I was the only one. The only one in the world" – Office of the Children's Commissioner's Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation In Gangs and Groups (Interim report November 2012), Office of the Children's Commissioner, November 2012. Available at: www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/I%20thought%20I%20was%20the%20only%20one%20in%20the%20world.pdf

[31] *Report from the joint inquiry into children who go missing from care*, published jointly by the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults and the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Looked After Children and Care Leavers, June 2012. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/175563/Report_-_children_who_go_missing_from_care.pdf

[32] Office of the Children's Commissioner: Briefing for the Rt Hon Michael Gove MP, Secretary of State for Education, on the emerging findings of the Office of the Children's Commissioner's Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Gangs and Groups, with a special focus on children in care www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/Accelerated_Report_for_the_Secretary_of_State_for_Education.pdf

[33] *Still Running 3: early findings from our third national survey of young runaways*, Rees G, The Children's Society, 2011. Available at: www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/tcs/u32/still-running_3_report.pdf

[34] *Off the Radar – Children and Young People on the Streets in the UK*, Emilie Smeaton, Railway Children, Cheshire, November 2009. Available at: www.railwaychildren.org.uk/media/11700/off-the-radar-full-report.pdf

[35] The Sexual Offences Act 2003 recognised the following offences: arranging or facilitating a child sex offence (child under 16) (section 14); meeting a child following sexual grooming (child under 16) (section 15); paying for the sexual services of a child (section 47); causing or inciting child prostitution

The nationally-agreed NPCC definition of CSE[36] is:

- sexual exploitation of children and young people under 18 involves exploitative situations, contexts and relationships where the young person (or third person/s) received 'something' (e.g. food, accommodation, drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, affection, gifts, money) as a result of them performing, and/or others performing on them, sexual activities.

- child sexual exploitation can occur through the use of technology without the child's immediate recognition; for example being persuaded to post images on the internet/mobile phones without immediate payment or gain.

Violence, coercion and intimidation are common features of CSE. Involvement in exploitative relationships is characterised by the child's or young person's limited availability of choice, as a result of their social, economic or emotional vulnerability.

Another common feature of CSE is that the child or young person does not recognise the coercive nature of the relationship and does not see themselves as a victim of exploitation.

Children who are already vulnerable through abuse, neglect, or serious traumatic incidents in childhood are the most vulnerable to CSE, including online CSE.[37] The most vulnerable are also susceptible to other forms of harm such as drug misuse, poor mental health and offending. The Criminal Justice Joint Inspection report *Girls in the Criminal Justice System* paints a graphic picture of girls with multiple vulnerabilities.[38] All of the girls in the sample had been known to agencies for some

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or pornography (section 48); controlling a child prostitute or a child involved in pornography (section 49); arranging or facilitating child prostitution or pornography (section 50); and trafficking into, within or out of the UK for sexual exploitation (sections 57-59). For more information see the full legislation, which is available at: www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2003/42/contents

[36] *Responding to child sexual exploitation – Definition of CSE*, College of Policing. Available at: www.app.college.police.uk/app-content/major-investigation-and-public-protection/child-sexual-exploitation/#definition-of-cse (accessed 2 March 2016).

[37] See, for example:
- Berelowitz (Op Cit); *How safe are our children?*, Jutte S, Bentley H, Miller P and Jetha N, National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, 2014. Available from: www.nspcc.org.uk/globalassets/documents/research-reports/how-safe-children-2014-report.pdf ;
-*Children's Online Activities: Risks and Safety – the UK Evidence Base*, Livingstone S, Davidson J, Bryce J, Hargrave A and Grove-Hills J, UK Council for Child Internet Safety, 2012; and
- The protection of children online: a brief scoping review to identify vulnerable groups, Munro E, Childhood Wellbeing Research Centre, 2011.

[38] Girls in the Criminal Justice System. A Joint Inspection by HM Inspectorate of Probation, Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales, Care Quality Commission, HMIC, HM Inspectorate of Prisons, Ofsted, HM Inspectorate of Probation, December 2014. Available at: www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprobation/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2014/12/Girls-in-the-Criminal-Justice-System.pdf

considerable time and a number were known to have been sexually abused at some point. The girls were vulnerable to sexual exploitation from their association with gangs or from older men, and faced other risks.

It is essential to understand the grooming process through which a child becomes or is made to feel complicit in his or her own abuse.[39] This relationship-building may be in person or online and may happen very quickly or take a considerable time. Some children may be dependent or made dependent on drugs or alcohol. If and when children begin to understand that they are being abused, the abuse is likely to be well-established and the children may be unable to disclose what has happened to them, ether believing themselves responsible for what has happened or fearful that the authorities will judge them so.

These factors, coupled with a reluctance to disclose abuse because of fear of reprisals or loyalty, means that victims are unlikely to report offences committed against them. In this respect CSE is very different to many other crimes and requires a different response. Police forces and other agencies have to be proactive in seeking out the abused and the abusers and must develop innovative means of gathering evidence when initial evidence is likely to be poor or ambiguous and witnesses are unhelpful.

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[39] *Caught in a Trap*: *the impact of grooming in 2012*, Childline, 2012. Available at:
www.nspcc.org.uk/globalassets/documents/research-reports/caught-trap-study.pdf

3. The scale of the problem

To inform our understanding of police practice on this issue, we explored the availability of data on missing and absent children, both through published sources and through requests to police forces for relevant data as part of our PEEL vulnerability inspections. This chapter sets out our findings.

Definitions

HMIC's PEEL vulnerability inspections sought information from all forces in respect of how they defined 'missing' and 'absent', 'repeat missing' and 'long term missing' and the number of children recorded in each category. The way in which a force defines and interprets these categories will, self-evidently, affect the way in which it counts and responds to incidents. The definitions of absent and missing provided in guidance to the police by ACPO, and by the All-Wales Protocol for forces in Wales, are set out in chapter two.

Absent definition

The ACPO definition of 'absent' was updated in March 2015 to include the phrase 'and there is no apparent risk'. The vulnerability data collection, part of the HMIC PEEL inspections, was sent to forces in April 2015. We found that those forces using the ACPO definition of absent are using both the March 2015 version and the previous version, meaning that the response provided may vary.

Thirty-six forces use the ACPO definition for absent, including three forces which use additional qualifiers (such as 'context suggests there is a lower level of risk' or by placing a time limit before 'absent' becomes 'missing'). Three forces do not use the ACPO definition but use their own (which are broadly similar to the national definition). While forces are using the same or similar definitions of absent there is significant variation in how these definitions are applied. Four forces do not record children as 'absent', therefore recording all reports as 'missing'.[40] Other forces do not use the category of absent for children below a certain age, irrespective of the nature of the concern. In other forces the 'absent' category is used only for looked after children living in care homes (which are expected to undertake the initial search enquiries).

Missing definition

Thirty nine forces use the ACPO definition for 'missing', including one force which expands the ACPO definition to include a wider set of circumstances. Four forces do not use the ACPO definition of 'missing'.

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[40] An additional force noted that it was planning to remove the absent category.

Repeat or long term missing definition

Definitions of 'repeat missing' vary across forces. A number of forces define 'repeat missing' as three times or more in a 90-day period but others include anyone who has been missing more than once. Some forces do not have a definition at all. The identification of 'repeat missing' is important as this is often the threshold set for triggering inter-agency intervention.

Force definitions of a person who is missing 'long term' vary from over 24 hours to six months and some forces do not categorise a missing incident in this way. However, even those forces that use a much shorter period to define 'long term' reported only a few people in this category, suggesting under-recording of individuals as 'long term' missing.

National data

HMIC data collection

HMIC asked all 43 police forces for information on the number of missing and absent child incidents.

The data provided by forces to HMIC indicated that across England and Wales the total number of missing incidents recorded in the 12 months to 31 March 2015 was just under 281,000.[41]

However, this figure must be treated with caution as forces did not respond consistently to the data collection request. Some forces, due to the limitations of their IT systems, were unable to separate details of missing adults from missing children. Additionally, some police systems cannot separate 'missing' and 'absent' incidents, which means some forces' data include 'missing' and 'absent' data only as a total. Some forces provided a figure taken from their command and control systems which means they are likely to have provided a figure relating to the number of calls received relating to a missing person as opposed to the child missing incidents figure. This may result in the figures provided from some forces including calls received for missing adults as well as children, cases of 'absent' as well as 'missing' people, and could include multiple counts for the same case.

The data provided by forces show that across England and Wales the total number of 'absent' incidents recorded in the 12 months to 31 March 2015 was nearly 53,000.[42] However, as noted with missing children data, there are similar concerns over the accuracy of the data.

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[41] Two forces did not provide data. Some forces figures do not include data on the whole time period because the definition was implemented in the 12 months to 31 March 2015.

[42] This figure excludes the four forces that do not use the absent category, and two further forces that did not provide data.

As we have stated previously there are still concerns about the interoperability of police information management and communication systems and whether forces are keeping pace with technological advancements. For missing and absent children this poses a real danger. The current quality of, and access to, management information is limiting forces' abilities fully to understand the scale of missing and absent children, the quality of service (and outcomes for children) and the demand being placed upon them.

National Crime Agency UK Missing Persons Bureau

Data on police reports for absent or missing people are collected by the UK Missing Persons Bureau, now part of the NCA.[43] As with the HMIC data, there are a number of limitations to the way in which the information is collected, including a lack of distinction between children and adults, inconsistent accuracy of the returns and variability of force compliance with recording requirements. Furthermore, the difference in approaches taken by forces to the use of definitions of 'missing' and 'absent' – as highlighted at the start of this chapter – compounds the limitations. The figures, therefore, give only a partial picture of the scale of the problem.

The NCA counted over 210,000 incidents of people going missing in England and Wales in the financial year 2014-2015, of which nearly 128,000 were children. These cases involved over 137,000 people, of which nearly 67,000 were children.

The police service has provided very different data on incidents to the NCA and to HMIC. Some of these discrepancies can be explained if forces have returned calls data to one and incidents data to another, and also by the failure of force systems to separate records of adults and children. However there remain instances where different figures have been provided and the reason is not easily identifiable.

The NCA reported demographic data for 42 forces. The 15-to-17 years age group was the group most frequently reported as being missing, making up 35 percent of all missing person reports. This compares with a study by the Children's Society, published in 2011, which found that the median age for running away overnight was 15 years and 3 months.[44] It is likely that the figures represent multiple incidents in a number of these cases but it is not possible to assess how many this might be.

In all age groups for children under the age of 12, the number of incidents of boys going missing was greater than the number of girls. However, for 12 to 14-year-olds and 15 to 17-year-olds, girls outnumbered boys.

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[43] *UK Missing Persons Bureau: Missing Persons High Level Data Report 2014-2015*, NCA, December 2015. Available at: www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/publications/654-missing-persons-high-level-data-report-2014-2015/file

[44] *Still Running 3: early findings from our third national survey of young runaways*, Rees G, The Children's Society, 2011. Available at: www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/tcs/u32/still-running_3_report.pdf

The NCA published data[45] on the harm suffered by people who go missing based on 20 police forces, which is fewer than half of all forces so is not necessarily representative of England and Wales. Other limitations of the data include:

- they relate to both children and adults;

- the harm suffered is categorised by an officer so there is a level of interpretation; and

- there is a reliance on the person affected disclosing the harm suffered in the safe and well check/return interview.

Information about harm was recorded in over 62,000, or 29 percent of cases. Of these, 96 percent were said to be unharmed when found. These figures are not broken down by age or gender.

There are further reasons to be cautious about the interpretation of these figures. HMIC's child protection inspection reports note that many children do not disclose abuse when questioned and, even in cases where there is some evidence that it has occurred, the child may deny it, or may not identify their experiences as abuse or exploitation. These figures therefore are likely to underestimate significantly the level of abuse that missing children experience. They do nevertheless suggest that harm is identified in only a minority of cases and that the number of cases of abuse known to the police is very small.

By comparison, research by the Children's Society suggested that one in four children who ran away overnight were either hurt or harmed while away, and/or experienced sleeping rough or staying with a stranger, and/or had stolen or begged in order to survive.[46]

Ofsted

According to Ofsted figures for England[47] there were over 17,000 instances of children going missing from foster homes (reported by foster homes but not necessarily to the police – some instances may only be reported to the local authority for example) in the financial year 2014-2015, a 29 percent increase on the previous year.

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[45] *UK Missing Persons Bureau: Missing Persons High Level Data Report 2014-2015*, NCA, December 2015. Available at: www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/publications/654-missing-persons-high-level-data-report-2014-2015/file

[46] *Still Running 3: early findings from our third national survey of young runaways*, Reese G, The Children's Society, 2011. Available at: www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/tcs/u32/still-running_3_report.pdf

[47] This information is not available for Wales.

This increase was a smaller increase than from 2012-2013 to 2013-2014 which had seen a rise of 36 percent.[48] Of those who went missing from foster homes, half were missing for less than a day and a further third were missing for less than a week. Half of the time the child went missing in order to visit friends and family. In approximately seven percent of cases, being at risk of CSE was given by the recording agency as the reason for the child going missing. In its 2013 report Missing Children,[49] Ofsted found that data collected by local authorities on missing children were generally poor and in some cases non-existent. The report noted that the reasons for running away were not always clear with both 'push' (running away from) and 'pull' (running to) factors operating at the same time.

We have also considered children going missing from residential care. While there is published statutory guidance in this area[50] there are limited data. The Department for Education published some experimental statistics[51] in October 2015 including, for looked after children, information on the amount of missing incidents, the duration of missing periods, the placements from which children went missing and the age and gender of the children involved.[52]

Demands on police time and costs of police investigations into missing incidents

The College of Policing has estimated that on a typical day, in a typical force, police will respond to approximately 12 missing person reports. Just under nine of these will be classified as medium risk, each of which will take an average of 18 hours of police time.[53]

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[48] *Fostering in England 1 April 2014 to 31 March 2015*, Ofsted, March 2015. Available from: www.gov.uk/government/statistics/fostering-in-england-1-april-2014-to-31-march-2015

[49] *Missing children*, Ofsted, February 2013. Available from: www.gov.uk/government/publications/missing-children

[50] *Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care*, Department for Education, January 2014. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/307867/Statutory_Guidance_-_Missing_from_care__3_.pdf

[51] *Children looked after in England including adoption: 2014 to 2015*, Department for Education, October 2015. Available from: www.gov.uk/government/statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoption-2014-to-2015

[52] In December 2015, the Department for Education also published the underlying data for this report by local authority areas. Available from: www.gov.uk/government/statistics/fostering-in-england-1-april-2014-to-31-march-2015

[53] *Statements about demand on policing*, College of Policing, available at: www.college.police.uk/Documents/COP_infographic.pdf

In 2012 the University of Portsmouth's Centre for the Study of Missing Persons completed research into the costs of police investigations into missing incidents based on work conducted with West Mercia and Warwickshire police forces.[54] Researchers found that 50 percent of police investigations in West Mercia concerned people who had gone missing on at least one previous occasion. In most cases the missing person was located within 16 hours. The cost of an investigation assessed as being of medium risk was thought to be between £1,325 to £2,415 and every new missing person enquiry required 12 tasks to be completed by the police, some of which had to be repeated more than once. Using the lower cost figure, on 4 August 2015 the chief constable of Greater Manchester Police said that searching for missing people cost his force £30 million annually.[55]

Summary

In summary, the data sets are not reliable and cannot provide a full understanding of the nature and extent of missing incidents or their seriousness. Inconsistent data, in turn, will mean that some forces do not have a good understanding of the nature and scale of the problem in their area.

The data tell us that a large number of children are reported as missing. Official figures from the NCA show that very few children who go missing are recorded as showing signs of having suffered sexual exploitation. Children's Society research evidence indicates that 25 percent of children missing overnight had suffered some kind of harm or were at risk of harm.[56]

The demands on police time and associated costs of pursuing all missing incidents are very high, but failure to carry out an investigation can leave some children at risk of exploitation and/or significant harm.

A better understanding of the scale of the problem could result in significant savings for forces, as well as improving outcomes for missing children, by identifying the correct support required to meet the needs of these children who are at risk.

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[54] *The cost of missing person investigations: Implications for current debates*, Shalev Greene K and Pakes F, 2013, Policing (2014) 8 (1): 27-34.

[55] *Sir Peter Fahy: Missing teen searches 'unsustainable'*, BBC News, 4 August 2015. Available at: www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-manchester-33738908 (accessed on 3 March 2016).

[56] Harm, or risk of harm, includes having slept rough or with someone they had just met, and/or having stolen or begged in order to survive, and/or being hurt or harmed. *Still Running 3: early findings from our third national survey of young runaways*, Reese G, The Children's Society, 2011. Available at: www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/tcs/u32/still-running_3_report.pdf

4. The experiences and outcomes for children who need help and protection – assessment and investigation

This chapter considers the police service's response to reports of missing children, from receipt of a report through assessment, investigation, support and help for missing children and prevention of future occurrences. We also identify the links between children who go missing, who are at risk of or subjected to CSE, and approaches to the safeguarding of these children.

Assessment

Initial response

Most cases of missing children are reported to the police control room by telephone using the 999 or 101 numbers. This can be by a parent, carer, guardian or a concerned member of the public. Some children go missing on a regular basis and are known to the police and other agencies.

In general we found that control room staff deal well with reports concerning vulnerability. Inspectors noted that most call-handlers are knowledgeable, calm and reassuring when speaking with the public. They seek information, often to a prescribed set of questions, and gather as much as possible from the caller. They check police computer files for any additional information and in some cases use specialist intelligence teams to obtain information. Based on the information gathered, call-handlers categorise the incident, make an initial assessment of the risks faced by the child and pass the report to a police response team for action in seeking the child.

In a number of forces, HMIC judged the work of call-handlers to be well-supervised, with risk assessments reviewed and used to determine the type and speed of the police action to be taken. This supervision provides the opportunity to review the risk assessment in the light of any further information gathered by the response team dealing with the incident, and to determine any further actions to be taken.

However, in a number of forces call-handlers do not have easy access to information held on police records or it is time-consuming to extract it from cumbersome police systems. This makes it more difficult to assess risks and determine the most appropriate response. In particular we found inconsistent use of flags on computer systems which could alert staff in the control room, and other staff and officers, that the caller or the missing child had particular vulnerabilities. Our PEEL inspections recorded that just over half of forces used a flag on their IT system and some could specifically identify whether the child was at risk of CSE. However, even when

flagging is possible, the flags are not used consistently, and some force IT systems are not capable of allowing any flagging of vulnerabilities on the system.

The importance of accessing all relevant information is demonstrated in the case below:

> A 15-year-old girl was reported missing from home. Although frequently reported missing, she was assessed as medium risk. She was believed to be with a man whose identity was known. If checks had been made on information already held on police records, and considered at an inter-agency meeting, it would have become clear that there were previous concerns about young people engaging in sexual activity and drug-taking with this adult. The case might have been assessed as high risk and managed with greater urgency.

Information from partner agencies is also important when assessing risk to the child. Forces generally have good working relationships with partner agencies and a commitment to share information about individuals. However, in relation to missing children, and indeed vulnerable people more generally, we have often found across our range of inspection activity that information-sharing is hindered by the inability to share information held on IT systems and poor recording on police databases of information received from partner agencies. For example, a child may have a multi-agency plan setting out information about previous missing episodes and what action should be taken in the event of a future missing incident. This is often known as a 'trigger plan'. However, staff in the control room and response officers sent to look for the child may not have access to this critical information. This limits the effectiveness of the initial response to missing incidents and can result in insufficient or inappropriate action being taken.

In both our PEEL and child protection inspections we found that even when call-handlers in the control room demonstrated an understanding of the risks to children, had risk assessment guidance in place to help them assess risks and their decisions were supervised, this did not consistently result in comprehensive and appropriate risk assessments. This is illustrated in the risk assessment section below.

Risk assessment

If a child is reported to the police as missing, the force will consider the circumstances of the disappearance and assess the risks the child is facing. This risk assessment determines the course of action that the police will take. In cases where the risk is assessed as high, the police will instigate a search quickly. In cases where the risk is assessed as medium or low, or where the force categorises the incident as 'absent' rather than 'missing', the police response is more variable.

The assessment of risk for children who go missing is of critical importance in determining how quickly action is taken and how well children are protected. There are two important elements to assessing risk: the first is the degree of harm to which a person might be exposed; and the second is the immediacy of that risk. The College of Policing guidance on 'missing' and 'absent' persons[57] also encourages forces to distinguish between those whose absence is out of character and those whose absence is part of a pattern.

As set out in chapter two, children reported missing are categorised by police as 'absent' or 'missing'. An absent categorisation normally means that the force takes no immediate action but should keep the case under review. If the incident is categorised as missing it is further assessed as low, medium or high risk.

As identified in chapter three, the application of 'missing' and 'absent' definitions is an area of confusion. Some forces do not use or rarely use the 'absent' category for any children, some do not use it for children under a certain age (usually 12 or 13 years) and/or some use it for children missing from care. Forces have arrangements for escalating 'absent' to 'missing' if the risk changes or after a particular time period, but there is no consistent approach to this. The College of Policing guidance on absent persons does not stipulate specific timescales, but states that the incident should have a review process and "be considered as an ongoing situation that has the potential to escalate into a missing person report or adult/child protection".

The College of Policing introduced the 'absent' category in recognition that the demands placed upon police forces in responding to missing person incidents made it difficult to investigate every case fully. The guidance seeks to embed the investigation of missing persons within a risk-based approach, with an 'absent' category to enable monitoring of those who are "not at a place where they are expected or required to be and there is no apparent risk". Our inspections have found significant variations in how the definitions of 'absent' and 'missing' are used, and some evidence to suggest the application of the absent definition may sometimes be linked to managing workload both in the control room and by the response teams.

When reports were clearly understood from the outset as being one of 'child protection', for example if a very young child or a child with a learning disability or mental health problems was reported as missing, the police's initial response was usually good. Prompt efforts were made to locate the child using a range of techniques, including the use of the media in the most high-risk or urgent cases.

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[57] *Interim Guidance on the Management, Recording and Investigation of Missing Persons 2013*, College of Policing, 2013. Available at: http://library.college.police.uk/docs/college-of-policing/Interim-Missing-Persons-Guidance-2013.pdf

For example:

> A very vulnerable and immature 15-year-old girl with mental health problems and at high risk of sexual exploitation was reported missing from home. The police used all the means at their disposal to try to locate her. They arranged media coverage, used social media, scanned closed circuit television footage and searched railway stations.

> A five-year-old boy was reported missing by his mother, who informed the police that he had a diagnosis of Asperger's Syndrome. Immediately, the police assessed the child as high risk and despatched patrol cars to the area. Within half an hour the child was located by a member of the public and the police collected the child and carried out a safe and well check.

Many risk assessments HMIC saw during our PEEL and child protection inspections were clear, comprehensive and properly acted upon. As above, if a child was clearly at great risk of immediate harm and urgent action was indicated, the assessment and follow-up action was generally good as the following examples illustrate:

> A 14-year-old girl was reported missing late at night and had stated she did not want to go to school that day. The risk was graded as medium by a police inspector and good, expeditious police enquiries were made. Her family was spoken with and, based on the previous history gathered and information that the girl was in contact with an 18-year-old man who wanted to take her on holiday, the risk level was raised to high. The girl was found safe and well about seven hours later and it was clear that follow-up action with other agencies would be taken to safeguard the child in future.

> A 16-year-old girl was reported missing by staff at her care home. The police call-taker asked relevant questions and established that she had been reported missing from the care home on numerous occasions, and was at risk of CSE. Information was immediately passed to a neighbouring force where her family lived and she was quickly located. Officers attending engaged well with her, and gained information to consider future safeguarding measures to protect her.

However, in a number of cases HMIC examined, we consider that the use of the absent category, or the risk assessment in cases categorised as missing was inappropriate. As a result, the incident had not been dealt with at the right level of urgency, leaving the child at risk of harm.

We found a number of examples of cases categorised as 'absent' that we consider should have been classified as missing. Sometimes cases were categorised as 'absent' contrary to the force's own policy. Even allowing for the potential inaccuracy

of the data, we found a wide variation between forces in the percentage of children classified as absent as opposed to missing. In some forces there seemed an overuse of the absent category. HMIC found incidents of staff inappropriately downgrading the risk to an absent classification, which does not require the attendance of an officer or the ongoing review of the progress of activity to locate the person.

Our review of some absent cases showed that staff had not considered risk factors, including CSE and physical or mental health issues, despite the information being clearly available within the incident log or on the missing person's database. One of the cases reviewed showed a child assessed as missing and at medium risk, even though a force trigger plan directed that the child should be considered as a high risk if they went missing again.

The following case examples illustrate how children can be inappropriately assessed as absent:

A 14-year-old girl regularly went missing from foster care and was known to be at risk of substance abuse and sexual exploitation. She had been reported missing 15 times in six months. The control room operator graded the incident as absent despite these factors. This grading was challenged by the foster carer but remained unchanged, and no effort was made to locate the girl.

A 14-year-old boy was reported missing by his foster mother who thought he was seeking drugs from an identified supplier. He had been missing on 14 previous occasions and, when he returned 22 hours later, his foster mother informed the police that he had been taking drugs. This case was initially classified as missing, but was downgraded to absent, with plans only to review the case overnight and at the end of the following day. In our view this was inappropriate because the boy was clearly at risk and engaged in criminal activity, and because he was classified as absent there was no follow-up work or discussion with children's social care services about the incident.

A 16-year-old girl in care was reported missing. She had been missing six times previously. She was initially assessed as low risk but this was changed to absent on the basis of no apparent risk, despite the fact that on all previous occasions she had been classified as missing and medium risk. There was clear information to suggest that she was at risk of sexual exploitation which was missed by the officers. This girl was at high risk of CSE and should never have been classed as absent.

We also found incidents correctly categorised as missing but with a lower risk assessment than was warranted by the circumstances, for example:

A missing 15-year-old girl was assessed as medium risk despite her having been reported missing on ten previous occasions and known concerns about her relationships with older boys, one of whom was a registered sex offender. The child was considered to be one of the children at the highest risk of CSE in the force area.

A 15-year-old girl in care known to be at risk of CSE, and frequently reported as missing (on 28 previous occasions at the time of inspection) had a detailed trigger plan which stated that, should she run away from the care home, she should be considered a missing person and the risk assessment should be high. Despite this, the incident log for the missing episode we examined was closed without creating a missing child record, and no further action taken.

The underestimation of risk by forces was often linked to a failure to take sufficient account of the likelihood of CSE or other harm, and the frequency and reasons for any previous missing episodes. Our child protection inspections indicated that in a number of cases the force had not identified CSE risks to missing children. There was also some evidence to suggest the risk was assessed as lower because the child had always returned at some point and was deemed as likely to do so again. As can be seen from the examples above, in some cases information existed on police systems to direct that any future incidents were to be assessed as high risk, but this was not always followed.

Cases assessed as medium or low risk often meant that little action was taken to search for the child or to take any follow-up action. This is a particular concern where the child was clearly at risk of child sexual exploitation as the examples below illustrate:

A 15-year-old boy had been reported missing more than 30 times. Police records indicated a risk of CSE but this did not feature as part of the risk assessment or the response and the incident was assessed as medium risk. When the child was located there were no referrals made to other agencies or joint working with other agencies to assess the wider risks to the boy and identify any longer-term safeguarding measures.

A 15-year-old girl had been reported missing from her home on previous occasions. She had previously been known to associate with older men and smoke drugs and was 'flagged' as being at risk of CSE. While there was some multi-agency involvement we found little evidence of this being taken into account when she was reported missing again, and she was assessed as medium risk. There were delays in attempting to locate the girl despite information that she intended to travel abroad. The girl returned of her own accord several hours later.

The distinction between 'missing' and 'absent', and high and medium risk may be helpful in prioritising resources when a call is received and can prompt urgent search action in cases of child abduction where the opportunity to rescue a child before serious harm occurs is quite limited.[58] Unfortunately, however, the inspection findings suggest that the police are confusing urgency with seriousness of risk. If a case is not assessed as urgent, action is often minimal, notwithstanding that the longer-term risk remains high, and unaddressed. Forces will need to address disentangling the seriousness of the risk of harm from the immediacy of this risk of harm if their risk assessments are to work in the interests of children as well as in the interests of efficiency.

Investigation

The level of enquiries and investigation carried out by the police on receiving a missing report is dependent on the level of risk applied to the incident. We noted above that if a child is categorised as absent, there is rarely any further activity at the time, such as searching for the child or finding out why the incident has occurred. In some cases limited activity will be appropriate, for example where children return home or are found soon after the alarm is raised, are considered to be safe and well and not at future risk. However, in those cases where the missing child has been inappropriately assessed as absent or in cases where children have been absent repeatedly, such limited investigation will be insufficient and potentially leaves children at risk.

In some cases further activity at a later date, such as inter-agency discussions and some future planning, may be more appropriate than an immediate response on the day of the incident, or a full investigation. Inter-agency discussions, especially if informed by the return interview, can provide valuable intelligence for the police

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[58] Data on all UK child homicides since the 1960s points to children being killed within six hours of being abducted. *Practical Policing Skills for Student Officers*, Marsden S, Law Matters Publishing, Kent, 2007.

which, if not relevant at the time, can inform future actions or become one piece in a far larger jigsaw. This is discussed in more detail in the 'Support for missing children' section below.

Investigations can be made up of different components. Clearly the priority is to find the missing child and ensure he or she is safe and well, followed by any support and safeguarding measures to protect the child from harm. However, in those missing incidents involving offences against the child, the crime must be investigated, and offenders prosecuted if necessary. Missing incidents may also be linked to individuals or organised crime involving, for example, drugs or prostitution. A police response is required to tackle this, both to prevent and disrupt activities that may contribute to children going missing, as well as to address the crimes committed.

We found that responsibility for investigations of missing children varies across forces, with some using specialist teams and others frontline officers, with support if needed from specialists. Risk was often the determining factor in deciding to which team investigations were allocated. However, during our discussions with officers and staff, we found some evidence of confusion about who was responsible for investigations, with the associated risk that cases would be passed around, or not passed to the team with the best skills for dealing with the case.

Good practice in assessment and good practice in investigations were closely linked. In the best cases, the approach was an inter-agency one with consideration given to the investigative approaches that were likely to prove fruitful, support for a child and family throughout the process, and the measures required to protect the child and any other children who might be at risk. We observed the best practice in those forces that had trained officers working in specialist joint units, which led to improved protection for the child concerned. For example:

A 12-year-old boy was found by police after he had been missing from local authority care for four days. The boy had previously been reported missing on 18 occasions in the six weeks since his placement in the care home. The duty inspector recognised the ongoing risks to the boy, listened to his views, gathered information from police sources and other agencies and contacted children's social care services. In the light of the information and his discussions with the boy, he decided that the boy should be moved to a place of safety.

> A 12-year-old boy was the victim of assaults perpetrated by his mother. The assaults were reported to police by an aunt. The boy was very distressed and had started to run away from home to escape the violence. The boy's needs were carefully considered in consultation with him, his aunt and his mother. He was interviewed by a specially trained police officer and social worker. His mother was arrested for child cruelty and later convicted at court. The boy remained in the care of his aunt and the family received ongoing support. His mother was referred to an alcohol treatment programme.

However, inspectors also found cases where the investigations were superficial, with few leads pursued. Sometimes the initial work was undertaken by staff in response teams who did not have the knowledge or expertise to elicit useful information or, when CSE or other child protection issues were identified, to determine other investigative avenues that should be pursued. Forces did not always make referrals to other agencies and sometimes, having made a few initial enquires and passed relevant information onto children's social care services, police activity stopped. Investigations sometimes dwindled at the first hurdle of victim non-cooperation; and forces did not always use information from other agencies or a child's previous missing incident to inform their investigations or safeguarding actions.

> A 16-year-old girl had been reported missing from local authority care on numerous occasions. She had previously engaged in sexual activity with other children and older men but had not been 'flagged' as being at risk of CSE until a recent episode. No plan was put in place to deal with her long-term safeguarding.

Often children who are being sexually exploited are resistant to help. There can be many reasons for this, and it requires specialist skills, patience and perseverance to build trust and make progress. We found that many of the children with whom the police came into contact were reluctant to become involved with the police or other agencies, and that sometimes parents were also unwilling to engage with the police. For the most part, however, parents, carers and sometimes children themselves were clearly seeking help and did not know what to do.

> A 14 year-old girl was reported missing seven times by her mother. The girl had previously been found in a house with older men. Despite her mother repeatedly calling police and children's social care services for help, no inter-agency longer-term plans were in place to protect the girl from the obvious risks of CSE.

In some cases, lack of help appeared to be justified in police records (or in discussions) on the basis of the child being an "attention seeker" or "street wise"; or the behaviour was interpreted as a "lifestyle choice"; or, as in one example, because

the child's carer, the grandmother, "no longer had any control over her". A knowledgeable police officer would have recognised these behaviours as symptoms of abuse that should prompt, not deny, action.

In cases involving CSE, unless the investigation was part of a wider operation or the registered sex offender management team were involved, police did not always consider whether other children might also be at risk from the suspects, or whether the suspects were linked to other suspects or other types of crime. This might suggest that sometimes police see the relationship between CSE and children who go missing as one of vulnerable children 'putting themselves at risk' and therefore the responsibility of welfare agencies, rather than seeing such children as victims of adults who deliberately and criminally target vulnerable children and who need to be stopped.

> A 15-year-old boy at risk of offending, who faced serious long-term problems, about whom there were concerns, and who was involved in a sexual relationship with a 24-year-old female prostitute, was reported missing. Following multi-agency involvement the police served an abduction notice on the woman, but no further work was done to identify and reduce potential risks, and no plan was put in place to address the child's longer-term safeguarding needs.

> A 14-year-old girl in local authority care was reported missing. She had been reported missing on 20 previous occasions and was known to self-harm and be at risk of CSE. When the girl was located there was no evidence of a referral to children's social care services and no investigation into her allegations that she had been held by her boyfriend against her will and had to escape by climbing out of a window. There was no further assessment of the wider risks to the girl and no longer-term safeguarding measures were considered.

Our child protection inspections have found that in cases where the missing child was recognised as being at high risk of CSE, and the force clearly understood and had developed approaches to tackling the problem, the investigations are of a higher quality. In these cases, officers understood child vulnerability, offenders' behaviour, the process of grooming and the impact this has on a child's behaviour, including how this can be a 'pull' factor in the child going missing.

Specialist CSE teams often take responsibility for investigating cases of offending behaviour that puts children at risk of CSE. The police's initial engagement with victims and families is thoughtful and forces are committed to working with them in the longer term. Evidence-gathering is thorough and relies more on detection than victim co-operation (the missing child would not necessarily see themselves as a victim in these cases). Victims are supported throughout the process.

A 15-year-old girl was reported missing and believed to be with a much older man. She had been missing on 15 previous occasions and was known to be at risk of sexual exploitation. Following a risk assessment, the girl was considered to be at high risk of harm and the police quickly located her by tracking her mobile telephone signal. She was found with two older men, who were arrested for child abduction. She was taken into police protection, a multi-agency meeting was arranged and protective measures were put in place.

However, in cases where HMIC assessed the police investigations as inadequate or requiring improvement, the following themes recurred:

- Poor recording and inconsistent supervision;

- Lack of follow-up and understanding of frequent missing cases;

- Limited search for suspects or follow-up action;

- Little investigation into the children's behaviour, the places they were going or the people they were meeting;

- Inappropriate allocation of cases to non-specialist staff;

- Delayed and inadequate investigations coupled with a failure to understand wider risks;

- Actions were often limited when cases were more serious or complex with some indications that recognising risk and exchanging information was an end in itself rather than the means of achieving an inter-agency plan to protect children; and

- Missing children lacking an assessment of their needs, and a longer-term plan to meet their needs.

The child's experience

As we noted in chapter one, half of the children and young people who took part in HMIC's *Children's Voices* project last came into contact with the police because of concerns about going missing and safeguarding issues. Children who reflected on their experiences of going missing highlighted the fact that, more often than not, their contact with police occurred in unwanted circumstances in which police were responding to someone else's reporting of their absence rather than a self-generated request for support. This meant that, in such circumstances, children often experience police contact as unwanted and unwelcome, a factor which both increases potential resistance to police intervention and heightens the need for sensitive and empathetic policing.

A minority of participants with experience of going missing shared positive reflections on the police response. Positive features included empathetic and respectful attitudes, continuity of engagement and recognition of vulnerability and the need for support. A flexible approach (where possible) and a willingness to work with young people to minimise their vulnerability and identify solutions were also highly valued, as illustrated in the following example of a 16-year-old girl with repeat patterns of going missing:

"They go out looking, they try and ring you, they'll leave voice messages on your phone asking you to ring them back and asking if you're safe…in my experience, I didn't go home, I went to a party instead and the police were ringing me, asking me if I were going home… it were about 3, about 4 o'clock in morning…And he says "Hiya, just wondering where you are", so I'm like "in town", he's like "shall I come and pick you up?", "No, I'm getting in a taxi now" so I told a fib to the police officer, he says "Okay then, we'll see you when you get home, just give us a ring when you get home" so about half seven, I were getting on bus to go home…And this police officer rang me, he went "You're a cheeky monkey, you aren't you? Telling us you're on your way home and you didn't go home"...he was like "Where are you?" I said "I'm on my way home now, I'm on the bus", so then this police officer come to my house …He were like a nice police officer because of the way he was with me, we were having a laugh, getting along whereas another time, there were these women police officers, they've obviously been out all night looking for me…like you can get nice police officers and then you can get horrible ones…she were cocky, bitchy with me…if a person goes missing, you're meant to look for them…if you don't like it, if you don't like looking for people at whatever time then don't be a police officer…don't come to me with the attitude".

However, positive experiences were presented as exceptional practice rather than the norm. The majority of participants registered dissatisfaction with how police responded to their missing episodes. Participants were particularly unhappy with the way that young people who run away can be regarded – and subsequently treated – as troublesome or problematic, which often led to a challenging, rather than empathetic, approach. They also highlighted a perceived lack of recognition of, and response to, the vulnerability of these young people, with little consideration of either their reasons for running away (what they might be running from) or the risks they might be exposed to while missing, and how they might therefore be feeling when police locate them.

Participants spoke of being made to feel guilty about the trouble they had caused police, the time taken to look for them and the worry caused to others:

"Yes okay if you want to tell me how much I've cost the police force tell me, but don't do it in a snotty way. He was like, do you know how much you've charged the police force tonight, over £1,000. I was thinking, yes okay I've done wrong and yes okay I shouldn't have run away and yes you have wasted your time in certain ways, but first of all this is your job. Yes okay I shouldn't have done what I done but it is your job at the end of the day. I'm not the only one who's ever done this either. And yes okay you've worked overtime and you're probably tired but there is no way… you shouldn't talk to me like that. If he said to me, by the way look, if you want to do this again… that's nothing like he said. By the way, if you do this again this is how much it does cost us." (15-year-old female)

Participants also spoke about being made to feel "like a criminal" as a result of how police responded to their missing episodes. These associations with punishment, discipline and guilt are reflected in the language they used to describe their experiences of police responses to missing incidents (for example "caught", "restrained", "in trouble" or "scared"); language that is often more aligned with experiences of having committed a crime rather than being in need of protection:

"In all honesty they made me feel like I'd just committed murder. I know it sounds like a really stupid thing to say, but you just had a young person run away from home, they're going to be shaken up, they wouldn't have eaten, I hadn't eaten for 24 hours at least. I was run down, very tired, very stressed out and they just, kind of, threw everything at me and said, "Well, you shouldn't have done that because you've done something wrong". But if it, well in my view, I done the perfect thing to remove myself from a harmful situation, which I had called up 999 multiple occasions after my mum had hit, kicked all that stuff. I got through to them, nothing was done… I'd run away multiple times from home, but in January this year was the first time that I'd actually made it out of my village and the way the police handled it was just disgusting". (14-year-old female)

"Don't just say, oh you're coming with us, if you don't come home, you're coming in a police cell, just don't say that 'cause that won't make us feel any better. That's just gonna make us feel more annoyed and angry because they're not understanding, they're just doing their job but they're not doing their job properly because they're not listening to people. They just say, "you're coming with us, you're going home" without explanation or anything, they just say what they need to say and just do it. They don't take time to understand or talk… they can at least say, "We're police officers, we're not going to take you home if you don't want to, we can make arrangements or something" and not just saying, "You're coming home with us". Yeah, just not right…running away is a choice, it's not breaking the law."
(13-year-old female)

Participants also expressed a belief that the police, in general, have a bias against youth and do not treat young people fairly. For example:

"I think if they saw like a gang with like all tracksuits and hoods up and stuff, I think they'd see them more as being naughty than like a bunch of other people just sitting in a park playing or something." (14-year-old female)

Participants felt that police failed to identify and respond to vulnerability in missing situations, or to understand children and young people's perspectives. As a consequence, they might return children to a situation of risk, having failed to identify that the presence of harm in that environment had been the reason why the young person had run away in the first place:

"That's where the problem is…They take you back into the problem, to make it worse." (13-year-old female)

"It's weird because if you were running away from a problem at home, and you're running away because of that, and you don't really have anywhere to stay, or you don't have anywhere safe to stay. The police will come and they go, 'Oh you don't have anywhere safe to stay so we're going to have to take you home.' They're putting you back in that position. Depending on what time it is, so say if it was like three in the morning, like calling up ChildLine or Social Services, it takes a while. So that young person may be going home at risk, and the police wouldn't really care. They will literally, it will be like this, 'We've done our job, we took her home, cross that person off our list, let's go for the next person.' That's it." (17-year-old female)

Some examples of what was considered to be exemplary police practice were shared, relating to respectful and supportive engagement with children whose safety was compromised. However, there were many more examples where children experienced police practice which, as recounted, fell short of expected standards.

A number of participants also raised concerns about the use of excessive force or restraint when the police were trying to stop a young person from running. In one case, a young female described a response from the police following her missing episodes that clearly indicated that she was regarded as wasting police time. It included the use of deeply derogatory language, accusations of blame and, perhaps most disturbingly, attributed responsibility to her for others' sexual victimisation:

> "They're really rude, some of them. I've been, like, sworn at. I've been told that it's my fault people are out there getting raped because they [the police] can't stop them and that's what I got told, me and my friend got told. Yeah, I got sworn at. I got told that I was an attention seeking little bitch and I had a court case going on and apparently I was going to f**k up that".
> (17-year-old girl)

This same girl described a separate encounter in which disproportionate force was applied in an attempt to prevent her from running away. It is notable that this was presented as a 'detention', more frequently applied to offending behaviour, reflecting her perception that such restraint was punitive and potentially antagonising:

> "They detained me because they thought I was going to run and I was like, 'I'm not going to run. I don't have the energy to run,' so they detained me anyway, pushed me to the floor and detained me…Being restrained for me and my friends is not a good thing, like, we don't like it…I think it makes most people want to lash out even more because it's like being arrested for something you haven't actually done, except they don't go through the whole procedures, like your rights and stuff. They don't go through that, but still, it's like being arrested for doing nothing. It's not nice." (17-year-old girl)

A similar point was raised by a 13-year-old girl who described being threatened with a Taser as a response to her running away:

> "I've been threatened with a Taser. They said because I was trying to run away, they said "if you carry on running away, we are gonna Taser you and restrain you" and I was just like "No, I'm trying to get away from the problem, that's just gonna make the problem worse". And I don't think they should Taser people under the age of 16. I think that's just wrong."

Wider investigations

Some forces had carried out wider investigations or 'operations' into CSE. These tend to be more expansive in scope and more complex, aiming both to prevent and investigate CSE. HMIC considered a number of operations which were noted as having been successful in prosecuting offenders and supporting victims throughout the process. In each of these cases, the work was planned from the outset and

processes put in place to assess the needs of victims and take action to respond to them. Specialist teams were established to conduct the investigations, thoroughly and painstakingly gathering evidence and pursuing all relevant avenues.

Examples include:

- Operation Sunrise is one of a number of multi-agency teams set up by Greater Manchester Police to tackle child sexual exploitation. In one of their investigations, one of the suspects was served an abduction warning notice but when he continued to remain in contact with the victim the police visited him at home where they found a 14 year old girl who had regularly gone missing. The investigation then revealed a number of serious offences for which this offender has now been convicted and is serving a lengthy custodial sentence.

- Operation Chalice in West Mercia resulted in a number of convictions for sexual and trafficking offences and was supported by force-wide training and awareness raising and use of intermediaries and missing person co-ordinators. Although investigations were undertaken by specialists, the raised level of awareness across the force meant that the work was better coordinated and more cases were recognised.

Some operations were targeted more at disrupting suspicious activity than investigating offences. Forces achieved disruption by increasing police presence in the areas where suspects and vulnerable children were thought to congregate and mix; and warning suspects of their behaviour. Most forces used child abduction warning notices to deter suspects, especially where there was insufficient evidence to pursue a prosecution. However, their use varied significantly from force to force and there was very little follow-up activity, such as arrests if the notice was not complied with, as illustrated in the earlier example. Nevertheless, these notices are tools that can help police take preventative action in addressing missing episodes and tackling potential CSE.

There were also examples of police working with voluntary agencies and approaching children to try to reduce the risk of them becoming involved with suspects, or to find an exit route for those already involved. Inspectors noted an innovative pilot scheme in Hampshire Constabulary where the constabulary's CSE team identified twelve individuals believed to be at risk of CSE, and provided intelligence to patrols of volunteers known as 'guardian angels'. These volunteers patrol known hotspots and seek to engage with children who are vulnerable to CSE.

Our chief conclusion from these findings is that police practice in cases of missing children is good when the case is relatively straightforward, for example where it is self-evidently serious and urgent or a child is very quickly found and no harm has been done, or where the case is part of a targeted operation. Practice is much poorer in those cases where the extent of risk and harm is not immediately evident,

where CSE is indicated or where children repeatedly go missing. This conclusion is reflected in the following recurring themes in the recommendations we made to forces in our child protection and PEEL inspections:

- Raising staff awareness of their responsibilities for protecting missing children, and especially those who go missing repeatedly;

- Improving risk assessment and the use of 'absent' and 'missing' categories;

- Raising staff awareness of the significance of drawing together all available information from police systems, including information about those who pose a risk to children, and using this better to inform risk assessments;

- Improving the police response to missing children and CSE to protect children at an earlier stage and improving recognition of the links between the two;

- Improving investigations and their supervision, and clarifying roles for officers involved; and

- Improving how forces identify, disrupt and prosecute perpetrators of CSE.

It is also clear that children who come into contact with the police as a result of going missing have a wide range of experiences. Children whom the police deal with well and sympathetically are more willing to interact positively and talk with the police. However as some of the examples in this section illustrate, we have heard some concerning accounts of how children have been treated and, in particular, that some children have been returned home where they face the risk of harm, without consideration of this risk or their views on this course of action.

5. The experiences and outcomes for missing children

This chapter considers the police service's support and help for missing children and prevention of future occurrences. Once again, we identify the links between children who go missing who are at risk of or subjected to CSE, and approaches to the safeguarding of these children.

Support and help for missing children

The police role in providing help and support to missing children is primarily one of planning and working with other agencies. This involves ensuring that appropriate safeguarding measures are in place to protect the child from further harm and to explore and address the underlying reasons for missing episodes, particularly for children who go missing frequently. As identified in chapter two of this report, many missing children are already in the care of the local authority, living with foster parents or in a residential care home. Others may go missing as a response to abuse in their family home.

Even where the initial decision not to immediately try to locate the child might be appropriate, given the child's circumstances, immediate risks and the resources available at the time, action should still be taken when the child returns. Discussions with the child, his or her family and other agencies should take place to explore the reasons for the child going missing, what should be done to reduce risk for the future and what action should be taken if there is another missing episode. Statutory guidance sets out what is expected of agencies to address the needs of missing children, as referenced in chapter two of this report.

Engaging young people in a purposeful way, in the role of a trusted adult, is particularly difficult for the police given their law enforcement role. Many young people distrust the police and many young people who run away and/or are at risk of sexual exploitation do not accept that they are at risk or that the police should be involved in their lives. They may understand the relationship they have with an abuser as being akin to a boyfriend/girlfriend relationship and may take time to become aware that they are being exploited or abused.

The police have recognised these difficulties by working with voluntary agencies to provide support for children who run away or who are exploited. Forces have also developed specialist teams employing officers who have well-developed skills in communicating with young people. We have seen evidence of some good engagement with young people, including cases in which children were initially hostile. Some action taken by officers clearly demonstrated that they were acting in the child's best interests – even in the face of indifference from other agencies or parents.

The police are required to carry out a 'safe and well' check with children who go missing. Following the return of a child from a missing episode a child will be seen immediately or as soon as possible by the police to ensure that he or she is safe and well and, if needed, the police should take immediate action such as enabling access to medical attention or the provision of a place of safety for the child. Our inspections showed that although many forces carry out these checks they are not consistently carried out across all forces and the recording of information from them is also inconsistent. If a child is categorised as absent, most forces do not carry out a safe and well check. Given some of the findings outlined above about children being incorrectly categorised as absent, this is a significant concern to HMIC.

The child's experience

Participants in our *Children's Voices* project believed that if police understood that going missing was generally an indicator of a wider vulnerability issue, and attempted to understand why they went missing and the risks they may have faced during this time, they would respond in a more patient and supportive manner. However, participants reflected little experience of this approach in practice, with many expressing a strong sense that most police felt their job was done when they returned a young person to their living arrangements.

A minority of children indicated that they had not experienced a safe and well check following their return. The majority of those who had experienced these checks described them as process-driven rather than focused on their safety or wellbeing needs. Where done well, as they were in a minority of cases, these encounters could not only elicit information about harm that had occurred, to help in any investigative processes, but also identify the associated support needs of children and young people. For example:

> "Like going back to the good and bad police officers, you've got it where the police officers have tried their best, who will sit there up all night with you, even after their shift. They will look for you and they will be like... This is what the outcome became, and you know the police officer is trying when their shift is over and they're still there helping…if you feel like they're trying, you feel like they care…If you feel like they care, you'll probably be honest enough to open up to them and tell them what the real problem is. It's like as soon as they know what your problem is that's how they can help you more."
> (17-year-old girl)

Where these safe and well checks are done badly, all such opportunities are quickly closed down. This is an omission that could have serious adverse consequences for the welfare of children and young people, and might increase the likelihood of continued missing episodes, and all the risk which that entails.

For example:

> "[With the nice ones] you sit on the sofa and you talk face to face, and they ask you, where did you go, and all the important questions like if you were safe and stuff. And they do it in a different way than other police officers, because other police officers just sit there, or just stand there while you're sitting down and just tell you off. They're like, why did you go, you shouldn't have done that. And doesn't let you speak…At the home visit, the nice police officers, the good ones, they do offer you some support. They will be like, do you need any support from anyone that we can get you in contact with. That's a good point but if it's one of the bad ones it's just, suffer." (16-year-old girl)

Some children identified a failure to explore whether harm had occurred during the missing episode and what response was required in light of this. A particularly concerning example comes from a 15-year-old girl:

> "The first time I run away, I got on a train with this bloke who raped me and he put me on the train back home because…so I came back and then I didn't have a ticket so obviously the ticket inspector had to call the police. Then obviously he found out that I was missing. So I was there and obviously arrived at **** and then one policewoman met me off the train and took me home. Nothing really got said between me and the police officer, or the police officer and my mum, they just literally just dropped me off home…There wasn't any communication really. It was just like, she's home, what else do you want us to do…there was no, would you like to talk to us or would you like to come to the police station in the morning, or would you like us to organise, I don't know, something for you…there was none of, we can help with you with this, there was like, you're back home...I knew there were organisations I could talk to, nothing bad was going on at home, just how I felt, but they just didn't help me at all. They didn't say, well we can…there was nothing. There was like…for me and my mum it both felt like she's home now, what else do you want us to do. We've brought her home."

Return to home interviews

Information from the police's safe and well checks should be shared with children's social care services to inform a follow-up interview by a third party (not the police) to explore the reasons for running away and the action that might be taken to prevent it in the future. Under statutory guidance these 'return' interviews are the responsibility of the local authority but are often undertaken on behalf of local authorities by voluntary agencies who work with missing children or children at risk of sexual exploitation. These interviews are intended to identify longer-term risks or more deep-seated problems. They are particularly important as children are often unwilling to disclose information to the police, but may offer valuable information if the interview is conducted well by a third party who has the trust of the child. Within the

scope of inter-agency arrangements, information from these interviews should inform all relevant agencies' practice. The return interviews might provide information for the police about likely suspects in cases of CSE or help agencies develop a trigger plan (an agreed inter-agency plan of the action that will be taken and by whom if a child goes missing).

Our inspections show that return to home interviews are not consistently carried out across all force areas. In a number of areas they are only carried out for particular missing incidents, not for all missing children (for example, they are restricted to children who are repeatedly missing, in care homes or assessed as high risk). They are rarely conducted for any children assessed as absent. Where they are carried out, feedback is not consistently shared with the force or used to develop prevention or trigger plans. We found few trigger plans even in those forces where their use was part of locally-agreed practice.

Although not directly responsible for conducting these interviews, police forces have an important role to play in ensuring that return interviews take place, and that the information from them is used to inform the police approach to missing incidents on both an individual and strategic level. A recurring recommendation HMIC made to forces as part of our PEEL inspections was that forces should make better use of information from previous incidents to improve how they handle repeat missing incidents.

In a few forces we saw some good arrangements to gather information from children about their missing episode. In North Wales, partner agencies had commissioned Barnardo's[59] to undertake work with returnees who were at risk of CSE or repeatedly went missing. Barnardo's uses a structured risk assessment process and there are effective mechanisms in place for feeding back information to agencies, developing plans and supporting the children.

Partnership working

We found a strong commitment from forces to partnership working, with various arrangements in place. We also found that some senior police officers collaborate well with their Local Safeguarding Children's Boards. Most forces were part of either multi-agency safeguarding hubs (MASHs),[60] or other multi-agency groups carrying out similar functions. Those forces with MASHs in place benefited from having staff from different agencies working together, particularly through improved information sharing. A number of forces were also involved in specific groups for tackling CSE,

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[59] Barnardo's is a UK charity working to support vulnerable children through campaigns, research and the provision of services.

[60] A MASH is designed to enable agencies, primarily police and social services, to discuss children about whom they are concerned and work together to safeguard children.

which included missing children. Our inspections identified a number of positive initiatives including:

- In Dorset the force shares a missing persons' database with social services and alerts are sent to partners for missing incidents;

- Gwent also shares a missing persons' data base and uses a shared risk assessment tool;

- Cheshire Constabulary has developed a Pan Cheshire Missing from Care Protocol aimed at improving risk management and ensuring a consistent approach to missing and absence reporting. The Constabulary support the delivery of the protocol with Operation Arundel, an initiative which aligns local neighbourhood officers and PCSOs to care homes on their beat;

- In Thames Valley there are monthly multi-agency panels for high-risk and repeat missing cases with referrals made to the CSE operational group; and

- Greater Manchester Police launched Project Phoenix in 2012 as a multi-agency response to tackling child sexual exploitation. It brings together public and voluntary sector partners across Greater Manchester to raise awareness of child sexual exploitation, help people to recognise the signs, ensure high standards of investigation and consistency, encourage people to report it, and to provide support to those children considered at risk.

However, despite these positive approaches to partnership working, HMIC's child protection inspections found limited prevention and long-term multi-agency planning in a number of cases. We found examples of children in foster care or care homes frequently going missing, with no multi-agency action or plans in place to protect them in the longer term. In some instances, where such plans were developed they were not of a high quality. Poor recording of joint agency information and plans by the police compounded the position, leading to a lack of clarity about joint working and longer term safeguarding and intervention measures. For example:

In a case of a 13-year-old girl, known to be at risk of sexual exploitation and who had gone missing on over 40 occasions, we noted insufficient information-sharing between children's social care services and the police; a police failure to send referrals to children's social care services; a lack of adequate longer-term plans; and a lack of action taken against the adults identified as a risk to the girl.

We found a range of different arrangements across forces and within force areas for multi-agency working to consider and discuss missing children. For example, some multi-agency forums considered and discussed all missing children while others only discussed children when they had been missing three times or more within a particular period. Such arrangements were initially introduced to provide a safety net

to ensure that running away would not persist indefinitely before a child's needs were considered. However, the approach by some forces may result in some children who clearly are at risk not being discussed until they have reached a threshold of concern. In the case of younger children, 12 to 13-year-olds for example, three missing incidents may be a strong indicator of something serious happening in a child's life which would warrant some discussion taking place at an early stage. From a national perspective, it also means that missing children may receive different support dependent upon the force area in which they live.

The case example below suggests that despite the best efforts of the police and other agencies there is still a lot more work to do in order to support these children, understand why they go missing and protect them from harm.

A 15-year-old girl had gone missing for the tenth time. The force used available background information well and quickly found the girl with her estranged mother. The girl had already been identified by the police and partner agencies as being at risk of sexual exploitation. There had been a good exchange of information about risks, and safeguarding measures had been carefully considered. The case continued to receive regular inter-agency review. However, the girl continued to go missing and her situation did not appear to be improving despite the best efforts of the police and social support agencies.

The value of joint working and obtaining support for children is demonstrated through HMIC's *Children's Voices* project. Participants recognised that the support that the police were able to provide was limited because of their role. However, over half of the participants who discussed support felt that the best course of action the police had taken was proactively to put them in touch with specialist individuals and agencies.

"I don't think its depending all on the police, there's other services that need to help. The police are so busy with other crimes, there's not enough for them… just to be focusing on kids." (15-year-old male)

"This is a positive thing that the police have done, definitely...This is the most positive and I'm quite thankful to the police for doing this for me…I can quite easily go back to what I was doing before but with this, I can talk about my problems. I know who to go to and I know that I'm safe with (name of agency)." (15-year-old female)

"Like the first time I went missing I was straight with (name of agency) [R: That was a positive thing?] Yeah, I haven't been missing for a year now since I've been with (name of agency) so that was alright…yeah, they are really good with support with other agencies." (17-year-old female)

A number of police officers expressed frustration at what they saw as a lack of appropriate action by care homes, either to prevent a child leaving or to search for them when they left. While this is clearly a partnership issue our inspections lead us to conclude that police officers could do more to work with other agencies in finding a solution to this problem. Officers could be more proactive in requesting case conferences, contributing to trigger or protective plans, or undertaking more thorough investigations. It was noticeable that, in those few cases, where individual officers used their powers to intervene and take the child to a place of safety, such as in the example of the 12-year-old boy noted in the previous chapter, protective action and improved plans were put in place.

Forces told HMIC that children placed from other local authority areas into care homes in their area presented a significant challenge. The police were not always advised when children were placed in this way, and we were told that local children's services had not always been informed. For example, during our child protection inspection of Norfolk in 2014 the constabulary told us that 520 children had been placed in its area from other local authority areas but it had not been informed of all of these cases. Children placed away from their home area are often at significant risk of going missing, not least as they may seek to get back to family members or an area that they know. The lack of information about these children is a serious obstacle to finding these children quickly in the event of a missing episode and ensuring that they are protected from harm. It also leads to an inefficient use of police resources, because the police must seek information from the local authority that should already be readily available.

A girl at risk from sexual exploitation was moved from a care provider in London to a care provider in another city. This provider was unaware of these risks. Intelligence was received that men were en route to the care home to collect the girl (with the intention of sexually exploiting her) which led to further investigation by the force's specialist missing persons officers that uncovered the history of the risks to this girl. She was moved out of the area before coming to any further harm but the failure to share information effectively could have had serious adverse consequences for the girl.

HMIC's inspections have found that forces do not routinely gather evidence to demonstrate the effectiveness of joint working and the good outcomes for children that it can enable. The lack of performance information makes it difficult to judge accurately whether the number of those children who repeatedly go missing is reducing as a result of multi-agency intervention.

Prevention

In addition to the responsibilities that forces have when they become aware that an individual child may be missing or at risk of sexual exploitation, they also have a duty, usually in their capacity as a member of the LSCB, to contribute to the prevention of harm or offending through educative and community based liaison work.

In general, forces are not making the most effective use of their locally-based or neighbourhood police officers and police community support officers (PCSOs) in preventing and tackling missing children. Some forces include the details of missing children in their force briefings and on their intranet, and there were some examples of officers having photographs of known suspects so that they could feed back any intelligence gathered in the course of their work. However, this was not evident in all forces. Our inspection enquiries suggested that frontline officers had limited knowledge of missing children, particularly those who frequently went missing, even though in a number of forces this information, such as the ten most-frequently missing children most at risk, was routinely considered by other officers in the force.

A number of forces have carried out work to raise awareness of CSE and the associated links with children who go missing. Some have undertaken media campaigns, and some have worked specifically with those working in the night-time economy, such as taxi drivers, hotels and fast food outlets, to help them identify and report any suspected CSE activity and children at risk. This has resulted in some positive outcomes as the examples below show:

- In Northumbria Police a high-profile media campaign led to three investigations into potential CSE, originating from reports made to the force by a member of the public, staff at a supermarket and staff working in a hotel. These reports resulted in three arrests including a successful prosecution in one case;

- In Northamptonshire Police, awareness-raising via social media, billboard advertising, digital audio advertising, a conference and an online toolkit for agencies resulted in a 50 percent increase in CSE referrals to the force's specialist CSE team from frontline staff across the force area;

- Greater Manchester Police through Project Phoenix has delivered training events with young people; professionals; parents; GP's, taxi drivers; schools; hotels; licensed trade; fast food outlets; shopping centres; fire officers; housing officers and local authority street cleaners to raise awareness; and

- South Yorkshire Police is running Operation Makesafe, which gathers CSE intelligence and works with taxi drivers, hotel workers, fast food outlets, door staff and concierges to train and raise their awareness of the issues. The

initiate had, at the time of our inspection in the summer of 2015, resulted in 40 calls from hotel staff reporting CSE concerns, which has led to eight arrests and safeguarding activity in respect of five children.

By tackling CSE in this way forces can address some of the reasons why some children go missing, and disrupt or remove the activities to which children are drawn and exploited as a result.

A number of forces were raising awareness through involvement in school programmes designed to help children keep themselves safe and to report concerns. These programmes focus on CSE and other issues to help children identify and repel inappropriate sexual approaches. Some forces have used theatrical productions to get the issues across in a more effective way. In addition to increasing the awareness of children about the risks they may face, this work in schools also helps to build positive relationships between the police and children, which is of critical importance in helping the police to address a number of the issues around missing incidents and CSE.

For example, in Norfolk at the time of our child protection re-visit in April 2015, there were ten dedicated safer school officers working full-time in nine secondary schools and plans to support the remaining secondary schools with dedicated safer schools officers through PCSOs based within the Operational Partnership teams. The PCSOs had a cluster of secondary schools and were based in each of their schools one day a week. In Wales there are dedicated School Community Police Officers working on programmes funded through the Welsh government and the four Welsh police forces. The All Wales School Liaison Core Programme[61] is a crime prevention programme in schools covering a range of issues including CSE.

Notwithstanding the frustrations expressed by some police officers about responding to children who frequently went missing from care homes (as described earlier in this chapter), our inspections found many forces engaging positively with care homes to try to take a more proactive approach towards preventing and reducing missing incidents. However, it was not always evident that these initiatives were being addressed through inter-agency discussions at a more senior level.[62]

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[61] More information about the All Wales School Liaison Core Programme is available from: www.schoolbeat.org/en/parents/know-the-programme/national-events/what-is-the-all-wales-school-liaison-core-programme/

[62] One of the findings from the Oxfordshire LSCB's review of its approach to CSE was that concerns at the front line were not being brought to the attention of senior staff in their own or in other agencies and had, therefore, remained unaddressed. The findings of this inspection suggest that this problem may be more widespread than the LSCB is aware. *Child Sexual Exploitation – 'Making a difference': the impact of multi-agency approach to tackling CSE in Oxfordshire*, Blyth M, Oxfordshire Local Safeguarding Children's Board, 2015. Available at: www.oscb.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Stocktake-report1.pdf

Although it is difficult to assess from available information how many missing incidents involve children in foster care or care homes, and of these how many involve the same children who repeatedly go missing, it is clear that these children make up a significant proportion of the total. For example, one force reported that 40 percent of its missing children went missing from care. Some forces have developed protocols or arrangements for sharing information and how to deal with missing children. A number of forces have nominated single points of contact who are neighbourhood or specialist officers, designated to work with care homes in their areas. Not only can these officers build up a relationship with the staff in care homes they can also do so with the children, which can help both to prevent children going missing and deal more effectively with missing incidents when they occur.

A vulnerable girl was moved into a care home from another force area. Proactive neighbourhood liaison work led to information being gathered and investigative work which revealed the girl had been approached by known sex offenders. The force was able to issue two abduction notices to prevent any further interaction. This risk might not have been identified had the force not established regular contact with care homes in the area, as part of its neighbourhood policing.

Access to specialist knowledge

Most forces have strengthened how they handle missing children by introducing dedicated missing person officers or teams. These roles vary from force to force but include working with partners (with some police officers and staff co-located with staff from other agencies), ensuring appropriate safeguarding measures are put in place for children at risk, reviewing cases, overseeing high-risk cases and offering advice and support to response and investigation teams. The lack of performance information and data in relation to missing children makes it difficult to assess what impact these dedicated resources are having on addressing missing incidents and improving outcomes for children. However, these roles do enable forces to build up specialist knowledge and develop, with partners, a more strategic approach to understanding, preventing and minimising missing incidents and to work with children who repeatedly go missing.

Many forces have dedicated CSE officers and many have set up specialist CSE teams, some jointly with partners. Although the roles of these teams vary across the forces, they are collectively promoting a strengthened approach to tackling CSE in England and Wales.

Most forces provide training for staff in relation to vulnerability and some have a particular training focus on CSE. However, consistency of training varied between and within forces with not all staff receiving training and a reliance on e-learning in a number of cases.

We found some forces in which staff had a good level of understanding of CSE and were aware of their responsibilities and what to do in response to CSE, but this was not universal; in some forces the level of understanding was poor.

Using intelligence to support prevention

At a planning level, the understanding of the nature and scale of CSE varies across forces. Most forces have completed problem profiles[63] but these are of variable quality. While we found examples of comprehensive information being gathered in a number of cases intelligence is limited to that drawn from police data without the benefit of wider information held by partners. We found limited evidence of problem profiling or analysis of intelligence about missing and absent children. Some forces are using information from incidents and discussions with partners to identify, for example, the ten most-frequently missing children or locations from where children go missing. However, many forces are hindered by a lack of reliable data and, in particular, by the fact that they are not able easily to identify repeat incidents of either missing or absent children. This limits forces' ability to have an effective, systematic approach to their responses to missing children, to protect them from harm, and to target disruption and enforcement activities on known suspects.

We found that police forces only provide limited information and intelligence about missing children to the LSCBs, and that there is no consistent approach to this provision of information. The LSCBs have an important role to play in ensuring that missing children receive a good response from the police and partner agencies but without performance information it is difficult for them to fulfil this role.

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[63] Problem profiles are a strategic review, based on information gathered, of the potential scale of a problem in a relevant area.

6. Conclusion

This thematic report has focused on the experiences of, and outcomes for, missing children who come into contact with police. National data published by the National Crime Agency suggests that most children who go missing are found, or return of their own accord, a short time after they have gone missing. In most straightforward cases, HMIC's inspections have found that the police's response is timely, proportionate and appropriate. Where the immediate risks are assessed as very high, police action is also immediate and coordinated, as is the case in targeted operations. We found examples of excellent practice by committed and skilled officers. Such practice was often instigated by an officer who understood vulnerable children and the risks they faced and was confident in responding.

Recent national inquiries and independent research demonstrate that children who go missing from home or care may be in great danger. In addition to known links between children running away and the risks of CSE, missing children may be vulnerable to other forms of exploitation, violent crime, or drug and alcohol misuse.

The Government's statutory guidance on children who go missing from home or care sets out the inter-agency approach required to prevent children from going missing and to protect them when they do so. It is important to consider our findings on the police service's response to missing children in this context. While the police have a major role in finding children who go missing, protecting them from harm and investigating any offences that may have been committed against them, it is only through partner agencies effectively working together that outcomes for missing children will be improved.

However, our inspections have also found poor practice, particularly where there was a high risk of CSE or other exploitation. The findings from this thematic review, and in particular the findings from our *Children's Voices* project, lead us to conclude that the police service's response to missing children does not consistently or sufficiently address the risks of harm to such children from CSE or other abuse. In the worst cases, police attitudes and actions have been described as punitive by children who have gone missing themselves.

Our inspections found inconsistency between and within forces, across all aspects of their approach to missing children, whether in respect of assessing risks, investigating complaints or supporting children. This degree of variation was strongly echoed in our interviews with children, many of whom described the variability of their experiences, including within an individual child's encounters with different individuals in the same force.

At one extreme, a minority of participants in our *Children's Voices* project described strongly positive experiences which enhanced safety and demonstrated empathetic and respectful practice by police officers. At the other extreme, examples were given of practice perceived by the children as abusive and undermining of children's safety and wellbeing. Between these two extremes lay the experiences of the majority of participants – positive in some respects and negative in others, with a greater weighting towards the latter in the majority of cases. Children whose contact with the police had been because they had gone missing were more likely than others to have had negative experiences primarily because they felt that the police did not recognise their vulnerability and need for support, but instead treated them as time-wasters or trouble-makers.

The clearest areas for improvement in police practice that we have identified resonate strongly with previous inquiries and research into missing children and the risks of CSE.[64] The major causes for concern are:

- The lack of accurate data and intelligence within forces, and therefore nationally, on the nature and scale of the problem of missing children and their exposure to the risks of CSE.

- Inconsistencies in the approach taken to risk assessments from the first report to police and throughout the case. In particular, we have found:

  - Confusion over the use of absent and missing categories, with inconsistent approaches between and within forces. This has resulted in children incorrectly assessed as absent, meaning that no action is taken to find them or provide follow up support;

  - Inappropriate risk grading in cases categorised as missing, and consequently a lack of urgency in the subsequent response; and

  - Inconsistent thresholds for and standards of investigations and/or follow up action to support the child and to investigate any offences committed against the child.

- Evidence of a negative attitude towards missing children on the part of some police officers, which determines their responses, and in turn undermines children's confidence in the police service as a source of protection and help.

- Safe and well checks and return home interviews are not being used consistently or effectively across forces. These checks are designed to ensure that safeguarding measures and other support are in place for the child, and to identify actions needed if the child has further missing episodes (trigger plans).

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[64] As referenced in chapter one of this report.

- The links between CSE and missing child incidents are increasingly recognised but this is not necessarily being addressed through forces' planning activities, nor informing frontline police work.

- While there are many examples of positive practice and initiatives through multi-agency working, we have found no evidence that the police service and the other organisations with responsibility for the welfare of children understand the outcomes this achieves for children and use this understanding to inform their planning and operational practice. As a consequence, children continue to go missing repeatedly.

Although the majority of forces use the ACPO-issued definitions of 'absent' and 'missing',[65] there are some local variations. Definitions of repeat missing are inconsistent across forces. The length of time a person has been missing before he or she is categorised as missing 'long term' varies from over 24 hours to six months and some forces do not categorise incidents in this way at all. Our data collection for the PEEL vulnerability inspections showed that many forces cannot extract their data on missing children from the overall missing person's information that they hold. Poor data quality and the inconsistent approach taken by forces make it difficult to assess the position in relation to missing and absent children and mean that a number of forces cannot or do not use intelligence to understand the nature of the problem of missing children and links to CSE in their area to develop appropriate responses and tackle the issue on a more strategic level.

We found weaknesses in current risk assessment processes. If a child is not identified as being at high risk, they may be neither protected nor helped when reported as missing or absent. Our inspections have shown that some children are incorrectly categorised as absent, with the assumption that no police action is required to find them. Some children are assessed as medium or low risk when available information suggests the risk is high. This is leaving children at risk of harm with no urgent action to find and protect them.

Police forces understand emergent risks and harm,[66] but this understanding is not yet informing practice and cumulative risk [67] is less well-understood. This is leading to forces ignoring harm which does not pose an immediate risk to life and limb, such as CSE.

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[65] Missing: anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established and where the circumstances are out of character to the context suggests the person may be the subject of crime or at risk of harm to themselves or another. Absent: a person not at a place where they are expected or required to be and there is no apparent risk.

[66] Emergent risks and harm are risks and areas of harm that are poorly understood but are expected to grow greatly in significance.

[67] Cumulative risk is the combination of risks posed by exposure to multiple agents or factors which will increase the overall levels of risk of harm.

All forces are at risk of missing widespread and long-lasting abuse of children within their communities because day-to-day police practices can obscure the seriousness of what is happening. It is not clear whether frontline staff do not fully understand what constitutes risk and so do not recognise it, or whether their practice is driven by resource and/or organisational factors. Forces are taking measures to prevent children falling through the gaps (for example, referral to more senior staff, requirements to categorise all those below a certain age as missing rather than absent, inter-agency discussions and information-sharing); but these tend to confirm rather than refute initial judgments, and there is insufficient scrutiny of these judgments by middle managers.

Our examination of cases during both PEEL and child protection inspections indicate that forces' investigations into missing children are inconsistent and that forces have more work to do to achieve a consistently high standard to ensure that children are adequately safeguarded and action is taken to prevent and minimise future missing episodes.

Forces do not always undertake safe and well checks. While in some cases this might have been appropriate, the reason is not recorded on the case files. Additional measures, such as the independent return interviews (a local authority responsibility) are intended to identify longer-term risks or more fundamental problems. Their implementation was inconsistent, often superficial, and the outcomes were not always recorded on police information systems. In some force areas, they were not undertaken at all for some groups of missing children. Police forces have an important role to play in ensuring that return interviews take place, and learning from them.

In most forces, multi-agency safeguarding hubs provide the forum for agencies, primarily police and children's social care, to discuss children about whom they are concerned and work collaboratively to safeguard children. There are also 'missing' forums or multi-agency CSE meetings in some areas. We found a strong commitment from the police to working with other organisations concerned in the welfare of children in this way, and some good examples of information-sharing and joint planning to protect and support children.

However, in our report *In harm's way: The role of the police in keeping children safe*[68] we raised concerns that assessment, inter-agency meetings and plans are sometimes used to screen cases from taking further action rather than as drivers for action.

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[68] *In harm's way: The role of the police in keeping children safe*, HMIC, July 2015. Available at: www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmic/wp-content/uploads/in-harms-way.pdf

Many children go missing from care homes, often repeatedly. Some police officers expressed frustration at what they saw as lack of appropriate action by children's homes when children were regularly going missing, either to prevent them leaving or to search for them after they had left. While a number of forces are working well with care homes to build relationships with staff and children, seeking to prevent and minimise missing episodes, our inspection findings indicate that forces could do more. In particular, more is required to find solutions for those children who repeatedly go missing and to gather information and put plans in place to help find children when they do go missing.

A particular challenge for the police (and children's social care services) is the failure of local authorities to communicate effectively with the police service when children are placed in care homes or with foster carers from other local authority areas. These children may be unknown to local services, even though in some cases they have been moved to the area specifically because they are at risk of sexual exploitation in their place of origin. In such cases, it is critical that information is shared proactively and effectively between agencies so that all those with responsibilities to safeguard children are equipped to take effective action.

In chapter three of this report, we noted Ofsted's finding that just under 50 percent of young people in foster care who went missing did so to see friends and family. It is reasonable therefore to conclude that local authorities placing children far from their homes may be a significant factor in the number of cases of missing children. A national analysis of patterns of missing behaviour, by location, would assist multi-agency planning and provision of suitably located and resourced services to protect the most vulnerable children.

The provision of services that meet children's welfare needs, provide support and ensure aftercare is available to reduce the risk of a child going missing in future is outside the responsibility of the police service. However, there is no doubt that a failure to provide such services not only fails children but also has a significant impact on demands made on the police. This point has been highlighted by HMIC in our recent thematic work on police responses to vulnerable people.[69]

The demands on police time and associated costs of pursuing all missing incidents are very high, but the consequences of not investigating cases can be extremely serious, leaving some children at risk of exploitation and/or significant harm. The question of whether it can ever be acceptable to do nothing in response to a

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[69] *The welfare of vulnerable people in police custody*, HMIC, March 2015. Available at: www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmic/wp-content/uploads/the-welfare-of-vulnerable-people-in-police-custody.pdf; and

The depths of dishonour: Hidden voices and shameful crimes ─ an inspection of the police response to honour-based violence, forced marriage and female genital mutilation, HMIC, December 2015. Available at: www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmic/wp-content/uploads/the-depths-of-dishonour.pdf

report of a missing child is an important one for the police to address if they are to prioritise use of their resources efficiently and effectively. However, the findings of this inspection establish that the answer to this question must be 'no' until such time as the public and the police service (in collaboration with their partner agencies) can be confident of a consistent approach to understanding the problem, the solutions (based on evidence of what works to provide positive outcomes for children) and how to assess risks to children on a case-by-case basis.

In summary, we have seen some excellent examples of effective interventions by police officers to safeguard missing children when the risks are identified and understood. We have also seen good examples of preventative work with schools and care homes, community awareness-raising particularly with the night-time economy, and some proactive operations investigating and disrupting perpetrators of CSE.

Nevertheless, our conclusion must be that too many children are being let down and left at risk. Within the leadership of forces, we found little evidence of a systematic, planned approach to addressing the issues of missing children and protecting them from harm. This might include regular escalation of known frustrations and operational challenges to senior multi-agency forums such as the LSCBs. Serious deficiencies in approaches to data collection by the police and their partner agencies mean that it is not currently possible to know the scale of this problem, either in local areas or nationally. The shocking fact is that it remains impossible to know how many children go missing, how often, and how many of these might be at risk of sexual exploitation or other abuse in England and Wales.

The strongest messages in this report come from our case examples and children themselves. They serve as powerful evidence of the gap between the commitments articulated in national policy and guidance and the reality of working practices on the ground, as demonstrated by the outcomes for many vulnerable children. They signal the need for cultural changes in the police service if children and young people, particularly those whose safety or wellbeing is threatened such that they decide to run away from home or care, are to have confidence in the police as a source of help and protection. The way to judge improvements and progress will be repeatedly to return to the voices and experiences of those young people who are reliant on the police service protecting them.

Recommendations

To the Home Office

- By September 2016, the Home Office should consult with the Department for Education (DfE) and Ofsted to ensure that local authorities are held to account for fulfilment of statutory responsibilities set out in the 2013 DfE statutory guidelines, with a particular focus on service provision to undertake return interviews.

- By September 2016, the Home Office, in conjunction with the National Police Chiefs' Council and National Crime Agency, should consider the limitations of police forces' systems which operate in isolation within force boundaries and prevent a national overview of children missing at any one time. A system should be developed to improve the current data collection system, for individual forces and collectively across the service, to both better inform risk assessments for children who go missing and to strengthen the national overview of risks to children.

- By December 2016, the Home Office should work with DfE to review, with relevant government departments, the placement of looked-after children in other local authority areas. This review should consider compliance with current procedures including multi-agency information-sharing, risk assessments and monitoring information from local authority placements.

To the National Police Chiefs' Council

- By May 2016, the national policing lead should ensure that the findings and recommendations within this report inform the proposed cross-Government Strategy due to be launched later this year and that they are included in any subsequent action plan, with the outcomes being overseen by the National Missing Persons Oversight Group.

- By September 2016, the national policing lead, in conjunction with the Department for Education, should consult with the Association of Independent Local Safeguarding Children's Board Chairs, to improve oversight within local authority areas to ensure that agencies are fulfilling their statutory responsibilities. This should include arrangements for the collection and consideration of performance information in relation to children who go missing and better oversight of performance information which focuses on outcomes for children, including seeking the views of children who go missing, particularly those who repeatedly go missing.

- By September 2016, the national policing lead in conjunction with the Home Office should establish the requirements for a national database of missing children.

To chief constables

- By September 2016, chief constables should ensure that information management processes are in place which focus on outcomes for children who go missing, and to provide better analysis to understand the effectiveness of the police and multi-agency responses. Information should include the diversity of the communities the forces serve.

To the College of Policing

- By September 2016, the College of Policing should produce Authorised Professional Practice guidance to provide adequate standards for the police service in relation to missing and absent persons, with a specific focus on the assessment of risk for children and multi-agency responses.

- By December 2016, the College of Policing, in conjunction with the national policing lead, should review the current approach to risk assessments for children who go missing, with a particular focus on the categorisation of absent and missing children and on children who are repeatedly missing. This should consider the skills needed and the methods available for police forces to assess the risk to missing and absent children to achieve a consistent approach across all forces.

- By December 2016, the College of Policing should have taken all necessary steps to ensure that all officers and staff understand the underlying causes of children going missing and how these can be linked to child sexual exploitation, other forms of exploitation and criminality. In particular this work should focus on ensuring that:

  - those officers and staff involved in carrying out safe and well checks are adequately trained and have the right skills to engage meaningfully with children;

  - information gathered from children following a missing incident is appropriately recorded, made available to all relevant staff (including control room staff and response and neighbourhood officers) and used to inform the approach to any further missing incidents; and

  - officers and staff have knowledge of, and effective referral mechanisms to, organisations who can provide the support that children need to address the causes of their missing incidents. This should improve protection for the most vulnerable children and prevent future recurrences.

Glossary

ACPO	Association of Chief Police Officers
APP	Authorised Professional Practice
APPG (All-Party Parliamentary Group)	a group in the UK Parliament that is composed of politicians from all political parties
Association of Chief Police Officers	professional association of police officers of assistant chief constable rank and above, and their police staff equivalents, in England, Wales and Northern Ireland; leads and coordinates operational policing nationally; a company limited by guarantee and a statutory consultee; its president is a full-time post under the Police Reform Act 2002; replaced by the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) on 1 April 2015
Authorised Professional Practice	official source of professional practice on policing, developed and approved by the College of Policing, to which police officers and staff are expected to have regard in the discharge of their duties
CAWN (Child Abduction Warning Notice)	non-statutory notice issued when the police become aware of a child spending time with an adult who they believe could be harmful to them. A notice is used to disrupt the adult's association with the child or young person, as well as warning the adult that the association could result in arrest and prosecution. These are sometimes also referred to as "harbourers warnings"
child in need	defined under the Children Act 1989 as a child who is unlikely to reach, or maintain a satisfactory level of health or development, or their health and development will be significantly impaired without the provision of services, or the child is disabled
CSE (child sexual exploitation)	nationally-agreed NPCC definition of CSE is: sexual exploitation of children and young people under 18 involves exploitative situations, contexts and relationships where the young person (or third person/s) receive 'something' (eg, food, accommodation, drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, affection, gifts, money) as a result of them

	performing, and/or others performing on them, sexual activities.
	Child sexual exploitation can occur through the use of technology without the child's immediate recognition; for example being persuaded to post images on the internet/mobile phones without immediate payment or gain
College of Policing	professional body for policing; established to set standards in professional development, including codes of practice and regulations, to ensure consistency across the 43 forces in England and Wales; also has a remit to set standards for the police service on training, development, skills and qualifications
control room	police control and communications room which manages emergency (999) and non-emergency (101) calls, and sending police officers to these calls
emergency powers	section 46 of the Children Act 1989 gives the police emergency powers to enter premises and remove a child to ensure their immediate protection
flags	markers on IT systems, which highlight particular characteristics or needs, and which enable police officers to assess risks effectively
independent return interviews	interviews carried out by non-statutory agencies with children who go missing when they return. The purpose of the interview is to try and establish why the child went missing and what might need to be done to prevent reoccurrence or to keep the child safe in the future
LSCB (local safeguarding children's board)	section 13 of the Children Act 2004 requires each local authority to establish a LSCB and specifies the organisations and individuals that should be represented. The LSCB has a range of statutory functions with the aim of ensuring that children are safeguarded
MAPPA (multi-agency public protection arrangements)	multi-agency public protection arrangements put in place to ensure the successful management of violent and sexual offenders
MARAC (multi-agency risk assessment	locally-held meeting where statutory and voluntary agency representatives come together and share information about high-risk victims of domestic abuse; any agency can refer an

conference)	adult or child whom they believe to be at high risk of harm; the aim of the meeting is to produce a co-ordinated action plan to increase an adult or child's safety, health and wellbeing; agencies that attend vary, but are likely to include the police, probation, children's, health and housing services; over 250 currently in operation across England and Wales
MASH (multi-agency safeguarding hub)	entity in which public sector organisations with common or aligned responsibilities in relation to the safety of vulnerable people work; comprise staff from organisations such as the police and local authority social services, who work alongside one another, sharing information and coordinating activities to help protect the most vulnerable children and adults from harm, neglect and abuse
missing and absent	The definitions used by the police are currently: • Missing – "Anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established and where the circumstances are out of character or the context suggests the person may be subject of crime or at risk of harm to themselves or another" • Absent – "A person not at a place where they are expected or required to be and there is no apparent risk." 'Absent' cases should not be ignored, and must be monitored over periods of time with consideration given to escalating to 'missing' if there is a change to the circumstances that has increased the level of risk"
National Crime Agency	non-ministerial department established under the Crime and Courts Act 2013 as an operational crime-fighting agency to work at a national level to tackle organised crime, strengthen national borders, fight fraud and cyber-crime, and protect children and young people from sexual abuse and exploitation; provides leadership in these areas through its organised crime, border policing, economic crime and Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre commands, the National Cyber Crime Unit and specialist capability teams
NPCC (National Police Chiefs' Council)	organisation which brings together 43 operationally independent and locally accountable chief constables and their chief officer teams to co-ordinate national operational policing; works closely with the College of Policing, which is responsible for developing professional standards, to develop national approaches on issues such as finance,

	technology and human resources; replaced the Association of Chief Police Officers on 1 April 2015 national policing lead senior police officer with responsibility in England and Wales for maintaining and developing standards and guidance for all police forces in respect of a particular area of policing
neighbourhood police officers	police officers who work as part of a team in a geographic area with enhanced local knowledge
place of safety	under the Children Act 1989, police officers can use their powers to remove a missing child and place them somewhere safe
PCC	police and crime commissioner
police and crime commissioner	elected entity for a police area, established under Section 1 of the Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act 2011, who is responsible for: securing the maintenance of the police force for that area and ensuring that the police force is efficient and effective; holding the relevant chief constable to account for the policing of the area; establishing the budget and police and crime plan for the police force; and appointing and, after due process, removing the chief constable from office
PEEL	annual assessment of police forces in England and Wales, carried out by HMIC; forces are assessed on their effectiveness, efficiency and legitimacy; they are judged as outstanding, good, requires improvement or inadequate on these categories (or pillars) based on inspection findings, analysis and Her Majesty's Inspectors' (HMIs) professional judgment across the year
perpetrator	someone who has committed a crime
PCSOs (police community support officers)	uniformed staff whose role is to support the work of the police officers within the community
police officer	an individual with warranted powers of arrest, search and detention who, under the direction of his chief constable, is deployed to uphold the law, protect life and property, maintain and restore the Queen's peace, and pursue and bring offenders to justice

police protection powers	powers exercisable by a police officer under section 46 of the Children Act 1989 to remove a child to a place of safety if the child is considered to be at risk of significant harm
professional lead	nominated senior organisational lead for a particular discipline
risk assessment	assessment intended to assist officers in deciding appropriate levels of intervention for victims
safe and well check	interview carried out by police officer with a missing person when they are found or return to ensure that he or she is safe and well
safeguarding	term which is broader than "child protection" and relates to the action taken to promote the welfare of children and protect them from harm. It is defined in statutory guidance as: • protecting children from maltreatment • preventing impairment of children's health and development • ensuring that children grow up in circumstances consistent with the provision of safe and effective care • taking action to enable all children to have best outcomes
sexual violence	any act, attempt, or threat of a sexual nature that results, or is likely to result in, physical, psychological and emotional harm
trigger plan	plan to locate a child quickly when he or she goes missing
vulnerable person	a person who is in need of special care, support, or protection because of age, disability, or risk of abuse or neglect, or is a ward of court child or young person for whom a guardian has been appointed by the court or who has become directly subject to the authority of that court

Annex A – Children's Voices research project

HMIC commissioned the International Centre at the University of Bedfordshire to undertake exploratory research with children and young people in England who have come into contact with the police because of concerns about their safety or wellbeing. The research, called *Children's Voices*, was commissioned as part of HMIC's National Child Protection Inspection programme and provides rich qualitative data on children's experiences of contact with police.

The core objectives of the project were to:

- integrate the views and experiences of children and young people into the inspection processes; and

- explore safe and appropriate means of facilitating this, informed by participatory principles.

Within this, the research specifically sought to:

- explore how children and young people come into contact with the police;

- consider how they experience police responses to concerns about their safety or wellbeing;

- determine the ways in which their rights are – or are not – promoted within the process, and

- elicit their experience-based views on 'what works' in engaging with children and young people around these issues, main areas requiring improvement, and how these could best be addressed.

The fieldwork took place over a three-month period from July to September 2015. A total of forty five children and young people, aged seven to nineteen, took part.

The project worked with seventeen agencies that had experience of providing support to children and young people, to facilitate the research. This ensured that the young people fulfilled the inclusion criteria and that a worker from the agency could explain the nature and implications of engagement with the study. It also ensured that services were able to provide follow up support if required. These agencies were geographically dispersed across England and included projects with a focus on child sexual exploitation and other forms of sexual abuse, going missing, domestic violence, housing provision, youth support and supporting victims of crime. They also included a project with specialism in child-centred communication that has supported children through criminal justice processes and a specialist residential care unit.

The primary element of the research was face-to-face qualitative interviews with children and young people. Participation in this strand of the research was open to children and young people who were seven to nineteen years of age (inclusive), and had experienced police contact around safety/wellbeing concerns in the last two years (when under the age of eighteen).

A total of 32 children and young people took part in this research; some 28 did so via individual interviews and the remaining four took part in small group interviews. All participants were offered the opportunity to have a supporter present during their interview and a minority chose to have a family member, partner or worker present in the room.

Half of the children and young people who took part in interviews and responded to the survey during this research last came into contact with the police because of concerns about going missing and other safeguarding concerns. All were aged twelve or above and eleven of them were female.