

Research Summary



Living in Limbo

The experiences of, and impacts on,
the families of missing people

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Introduction

Every year police forces in the UK receive in the region of 210,000 reports of missing people. Whilst most are resolved relatively quickly, other disappearances continue for prolonged periods, leaving family members to cope with the pain of not knowing where their loved one is or what has happened to them.

In 2007/08, the charity Missing People recorded nearly 30,000 enquiries about missing people and opened over 1,000 actively managed family support cases. However, despite the high number of people who go missing in the UK each year, relatively little is known about the day to day experiences of the families they leave behind. In the absence of any UK based research conducted directly with families of missing people, this research study was designed to explore the issues such families face.

Aims and methods of the study

This small scale, exploratory study aimed to provide a rich and deep account of the ways in which a disappearance can affect a missing person's family members. Qualitative in-depth interviews were conducted with 22 adult participants from 20 families of currently missing adults, all receiving services from Missing People. The missing family members ranged in age from 18 to 70, and the durations for which they had been missing ranged from several months to more than 30 years. More information on the ethical and methodological aspects of this study is provided in Holmes (2008) and in the Technical Appendix to the report, which can be downloaded from the Missing People website at <http://www.missingpeople.org.uk/limbo>

Context of the research

Missing incidents may be characterised by the degree of 'intent' on the part of the missing person (who may have left intentionally or unintentionally) and the role of external factors (including other people). This is demonstrated by both Payne's typology of 'runaways', 'throwaways', 'pushaways', 'fallaways' and 'takeaways', and Biehal et al's 'missing continuum' (Payne, 1995 and Biehal et al, 2003). In many cases, the missing person's intention may not be fully known or understood by the family members left behind. While this study did not adopt either typology for the purposes of sampling, the distinction between intentional and unintentional absences informed the analysis of the relationship between family members' perceptions of the disappearance and their subsequent emotional experience.

While the experiences of families when someone goes missing are under-researched, there has been some work that has developed relevant concepts. Boss has written extensively on the treatment of families experiencing 'ambiguous loss'; either as a result of a family member going missing and their fate remaining unknown, or an individual being physically present but having lost their personality, for example through dementia (Boss 1999, 2002, 2007). The concept of ambiguous loss provides a framework for analysing stressors, coping strategies and psychosocial impacts (including how family members' mental health and subsequent behaviour is affected by the experience).

Key findings

The research has identified three key domains of experience faced by the families of missing people: emotional and social experiences; financial, legal and other practical impacts; and experiences with service providers and the media.

Emotional and social experiences

“It is like a rollercoaster ride”

- Families may experience a range of emotions such as sadness, worry, guilt, anger and hope. They can experience 'highs' of hopefulness as well as 'lows' of despair.
- Emotional impacts may result in physical symptoms, such as sleeplessness, stress and deteriorating health.
- Emotional impacts do not diminish over time; families live 'in limbo' as long as their family member remains missing.
- Families' emotional experiences are affected by their perception of the disappearance; whether they believe the person left deliberately, and whether they believe their family member is still alive. What family members believe can affect not only their individual emotions, but also their relationships with other family members.
- Participants described a number of coping strategies they used to try to live with the disappearance. Examples of coping strategies include counselling, medication, religious faith, consulting psychics and mediums, and turning to friends and family. While some families actively seek to tell as many people as possible about the disappearance, others fear negative reactions and are wary about whom they tell. Experiences varied among participants, indicating that no one approach to coping works for all families.

Financial, legal and other practical impacts

“Financially we’re just completely screwed”

- The cost of conducting their own search affects some families, particularly the search efforts that take place before relevant support services are accessed. Such efforts include producing posters and leaflets and travelling in the UK and abroad.
- Disruption to family members’ work, caused by emotional or practical pressures, can have financial consequences for families.
- The loss of the missing person’s income can have a significant effect for families in which the missing person had financial responsibilities, such as paying bills or supporting other family members.
- Dealing with financial and legal affairs can be costly to the families of missing people, particularly where expert advice is required, as well as being a cause of stress and worry.
- Some family members find themselves in a position of paying the missing person’s bills, or covering their debts, for reasons such as wishing to maintain the missing person’s lifestyle for when they return or fearing the consequences of defaulting on payments.
- A particular area of confusion is that around the length of time for which a person must remain missing before their estate may be administered, their marriage dissolved, or for an official presumption of death to be declared.

Experiences with service providers and the media

“We don’t want it to be completely forgotten”

- Deciding to make an official missing person report can be a difficult and emotional step for families to take.
- A family’s perception of the quality of services provided to them can affect their emotional wellbeing as well as their likelihood of pursuing their own (potentially expensive) enquiries.
- Key influences on families’ satisfaction with service providers are:
 - Whether they believe that everything possible is being done to find the missing person
 - The extent to which they have been taken seriously
 - How well the services they receive meet their initial expectations
 - The personal manner of service providers

- The quality and consistency of long term contact
- How well they are kept informed of developments (or lack thereof)

- Families can become confused about arrangements for information sharing between service providers and other organisations and institutions. In particular they may be confused about the extent to which Data Protection procedures act as a barrier to search efforts.
- Families may feel obliged to have contact with the media to maintain publicity about the case. Media contact can prove stressful however, as families seek to portray a sympathetic image of the missing person and their family, and possibly have to confront prejudice and challenge negative assumptions.

Recommendations

Improving access to support services

1. Missing People should provide an enhanced range of advice literature for families about the emotional and practical support services provided by the charity, about dealing with media attention, and about other potential sources (in the voluntary and statutory sector) of assistance.
2. Missing People should arrange for the findings from this research to be incorporated, wherever possible, into the training, awareness and professional development programmes of other providers (in the voluntary and statutory sector) of assistance to families of missing people.
3. Missing People should work with relevant government departments and non-departmental public bodies (etc.) to maximise the opportunities for ‘mainstreaming’ a range of support services tailored to the specific needs and circumstances of families of missing people.
4. ACPO and the National Policing Improvements Agency (NPIA) should encourage police forces routinely to inform the family members of missing people of the range of support services available to them.
5. Consultation with families of missing people should be at the heart of service development and planning.

Clarifying the legal and financial position

6. Legal and financial advice and support should be available to the families of missing people. While

this may not be bespoke, some instructions should be provided to direct families to appropriate resources.

7. The benefits (or otherwise) of introducing specific legislation governing the presumption of death in missing person cases in England and Wales should be examined. Any opportunity to provide a robust legal framework for dealing with the estate and other affairs of missing people who are presumed dead, and for improving clarity for family members, should be pursued.

Recommendations for the police service

8. Police forces should note the importance of the initial and continuing police response on the emotional impact on families, particularly with regard to families' concerns that everything possible is done to find the missing person
9. The family members of a missing person should have a clearly identified single point of contact with the police force dealing with their case.
10. Investigating officers should consider families' need to know, as far as possible, what actions have been taken to find their missing family member.

Further research

11. A large scale study based on the findings of this research should be undertaken to estimate the prevalence and extent of the impacts on families, and the costs to left-behind families, and society as a whole, of missing incidents. Such a study

could also test the hypothesis, developed by this study, that families' perceptions of whether the disappearance was intentional, and whether the missing person is still alive, inform their coping strategies and emotional reactions to the disappearance.

12. Further research should aim to extend the theoretical framework by examining the impact on families of different types of disappearance, particularly comparing the duration, the characteristics of the missing person, the families' own perceptions of the disappearance and other relevant factors.

13. Press and media attention around cases of people going missing can have a profound impact on the families left behind, and further research should more fully investigate this issue in order to provide advice to service providers, media organisation, and families of missing people.

14. The impact of low or no interest from official agencies, and families' own expectations about services that are available, can affect not only families' emotional wellbeing, but also the extent of the search for the missing person. Further research should be conducted to explore the experiences of families who have little or no contact with the police or other support providers.

15. The main service providers (Missing People and the police service) should conduct evaluations of existing services to assess family members' satisfaction and to identify areas for service development.

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A copy of the full research report can be downloaded at www.missingpeople.org.uk/limbo

If you would like to discuss the issues raised in Living in Limbo please contact:

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