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UK Missing Persons Unit

Missing Persons Data Report 2020/21

Reporting period 1st April 2020 to 31st March 2021

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Leading the UK's fight to cut serious and organised crime

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Foreword

I would like to thank those police forces who have provided data to the UK Missing Persons Unit (UKMPU) to enable the production of this report. It gives us an important insight into the impact of missing person investigations on policing as we seek to develop a partnership response to safeguard vulnerable people.

I recognise the difficulties that some forces have experienced in providing data for this report on this occasion and I will work with forces throughout the year to resolve some of those challenges.

This report shows the striking impact of COVID-19 on missing behaviour. Almost all forces saw a significant decrease in the number of individuals reported as missing during this period as restrictions on movement were introduced. In 2020/21 there were 17.8% fewer missing related calls in England and Wales compared with forces supplying data the previous year. Scotland experienced a 48.3% reduction and PSNI experienced a 21.3% reduction.

Individuals identifying as Black, Asian, Mixed Race or from any other Ethnic background continue to be over-represented in missing person reports and this year, I am collaborating with academics to understand this disproportionality.

I have also set up a Task and Finish Group to look at why there is such variation in how forces categorise risk, as some forces categorise over 35% of reported incidents as high-risk whereas other forces categorise less than 5% of reported incidents as high-risk. These variations are more likely due to forces interpreting the risk continuum differently than genuine variations in risk factors in different force areas.

In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of asylum seekers and undocumented migrants who have been reported missing by the authorities as there is an increased awareness of human trafficking and modern slavery. Many of these individuals end up on long-term missing databases and are never located. I am working with the Home Office, Asylum Support, Immigration Enforcement and UK Visas to tackle some of these challenges as this is a trend that is likely to continue with the number of asylum seekers and undocumented migrants arriving in boats illegally increasing due to changes in the tactics of organised crime groups.

Another important partnership piece of work has been the exploration of the advantages and disadvantages of media publicity in missing person cases. There is scant research available to demonstrate how often publicity contributes to the safe recovery of a missing person. However, there is an increased body of evidence highlighting certain negative impacts of publicity on the mental health of the missing person and the long-term social impact on the missing person due to the social media footprint left behind.

Finally, although this report shows that the majority of missing people are located unharmed with only 4.8% of missing people known to have suffered harm whilst missing, I recognise that harm is under-reported and sometimes the harm suffered by

a missing person is not known until years later or is never known. Particularly, exploited individuals often do not report physical, sexual, or emotional harm that they have suffered during the return interview process. It is therefore extremely important that policing continues to work with the other statutory partners and third sector organisations to improve the partnership response to missing people.



Catherine Hankinson
Assistant Chief Constable



Introduction

This report is the eleventh in the series of data reports from the UK Missing Persons Unit (UKMPU).

The report contains data and a brief analysis describing missing persons for the financial year 2020/21. This year's written report is much reduced compared to previous years, with the aim of producing just the high level figures and trends in the written report, with the accompanying statistical report to be used for greater detail as and where required.

A glossary of terms can be found at the end of the report and includes any type in *italics*.

As with all of the previously published data reports, our statistical analysis is wholly reliant on the data being provided by forces. Changes in systems have resulted in some forces only being able to provide partial returns. We have produced a report that reflects the data we have received; unlike previous years, we have not used estimates based on demographics for each force area. The impact of COVID-19 on staffing levels and resources has resulted in a number of previously reported figures^a not being available for statistical analysis and reporting this year. It is hoped that those figures will be included in the 2021/22 report, along with a statistical comparison of ethnicity and age of missing individuals.

^a Excluded from this year's report are: ethnicity and gender, reasons for missing incidents by age and theme and an overall percentage of those reasons.

Methodology and Data Limitations

The 2020/21 Data Return consisted of a standard template of questions, which police forces throughout England and Wales (E&W) were asked to complete. The data for Police Scotland and the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) are drawn from the forces own reports, which do not follow the same standard format. The data, therefore, is not entirely consistent, but data extracts are included in this report where possible.

The Data Return template asked police forces in E&W and Scotland to provide key statistics on missing person incidents during the financial year 2020/21 covering the following areas:

- Names of their *Command and Control* and *Missing Person* systems.
- The numbers of *Closing and Opening codes* relating to missing persons.
- The total number of *incidents* and *individuals* and break downs into adults and children.
- The total number of outstanding missing *individuals* as of 31st March 2021.
- The total number of long-term missing *individuals* reported missing prior to the reporting period and who were still missing on the last day of the reporting period - that is, all individuals missing prior to 1st April 2020 who were still missing on 31st March 2021.
- Total numbers of *incidents* broken down by gender, age and ethnicity.
- The number of incidents by *risk* assessments made, broken down by gender and person group (adult or child).
- The number of incidents flagged with Mental Health (MH) vulnerabilities or with a Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) marker. These were split by gender and age or person group.
- The number of incidents by the type of harm suffered and person group.
- The total number of fatal outcomes of individuals who were reported missing.
- The number of *missing incidents* by *duration of time missing* and person group.
- The numbers of incidents resulting in the missing person being found, and who finds missing people, by person group.
- The number of *incidents and individuals* by person group, grouped by those that were identified as being in care or not.

While every effort has been taken to standardise the reporting of data to the UKMPU to allow for year-on-year comparisons, changes to reporting practices in some police forces mean that year-on-year comparisons are not always possible.

There are several other reasons why standardisation of reporting is limited, and these include:

- Police forces all operate with different systems, processes and procedures, and not all were able to provide data as required in the UKMPU's Data Return.
- Some police forces were unable to provide breakdowns by person group or by demographics (age, gender or ethnicity). Hence there are differences in the total number of incidents.

Key Statistics

The data used to produce this report has been taken from both police service *Command and Control* and *Missing Person systems*. Data has been requested from 43 police forces in E&W. Data from Police Scotland and PSNI is provided where possible to give a fuller, more comprehensive picture. Not all forces were able to provide all of the data requested; where possible it is stated how many forces supplied information.

Calls, Incidents and Individuals – Tables A1, A2 and A3 in the statistical report (Returns received from 37 forces, Police Scotland and PSNI)

**241,064
calls
E&W**

In 2020/21 there were 32.2% fewer missing related calls than in 2019/20 (355,637). However, when taking into consideration that six forces did not supply data in 2019/20 or 2020/21, this figure is reduced to 17.8%, which is the more accurate reflection.

**137,841
child
incidents
E&W**

In 2020/21 there were 31.2% fewer missing child incidents than in 2019/20 (198,973).

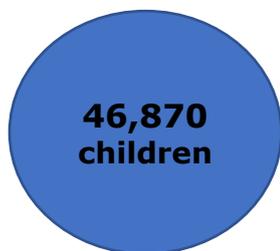
**101,606
adult
incidents
E&W**

In 2020/21 there were 19.5% fewer missing adult incidents than in 2019/20 (126,228).

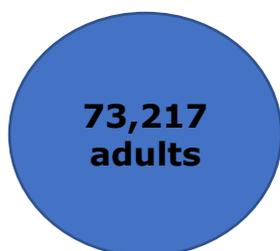
- On 23rd March 2020 the first COVID-19 lockdown measures legally came into force in the UK. Throughout 2020 and 2021 a number of public health restrictions were in place across most of the UK for extended periods of time. The legally enforceable restrictions and public concern over COVID-19 clearly impacted significantly on missing figures. When data from the six forces that were unable to supply data in both 2019/2020 and 2020/2021 is removed from the calculations, it brings the annual total of calls for 2019/2020 to 287,328 and for 2020/2021 to 236,069, with a decrease of 17.8%.

- Police Scotland recorded 14,745 missing related calls, a 48.3% reduction, whilst PSNI recorded 8,912 missing related calls, a 21.3% reduction compared to the previous year.

Number of Missing Incidents and Individuals Recorded by UK Police Forces - Table B2 in the statistical report (Returns received from 36 forces)



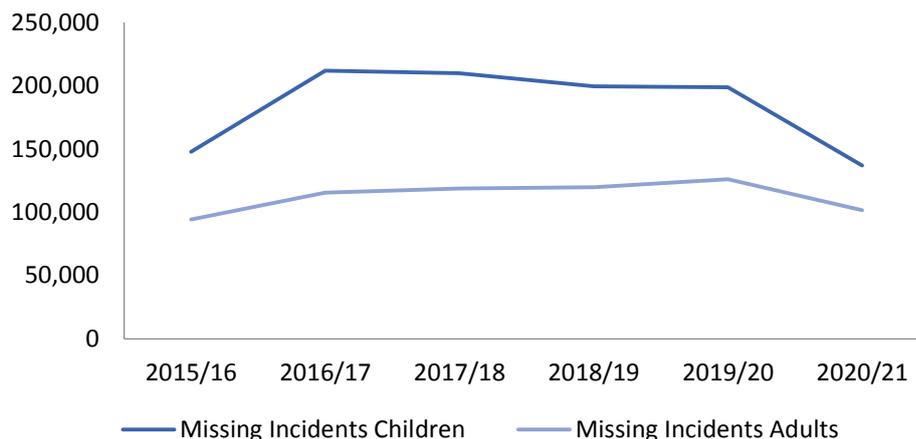
46,870 children were reported as missing in 137,043 incidents. This equates to 2.9 missing incidents per child.



73,217 adults were reported as missing out of 101,680 incidents. This equates to 1.3 missing incidents per adult.

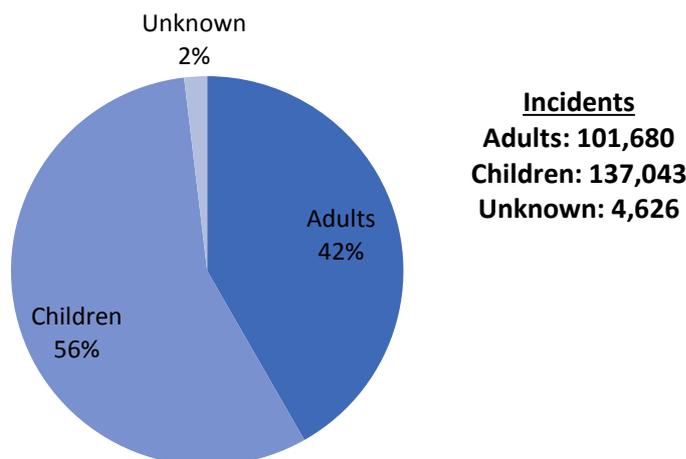
- There will always be more missing incidents than individuals being reported as missing; this is because some individuals go missing on more than one occasion. It is not possible for police forces to provide details on individuals who have repeat missing episodes for the purpose of the statistical report.
- Police Scotland reported 7,324 adult missing incidents with 5,636 missing adults, and 7,050 child missing incidents with 2,587 missing children.
- PSNI reported 4,200 missing adult incidents with 3,170 missing adults and 4,712 missing child incidents with 1,210 missing children.
-

Missing Incidents E&W 2015-2021
Table A2 in statistical report



- Missing related incidents have remained somewhat consistent since 2016, with changes in reporting, recording and systems likely to be the root cause of any slight fluctuations in the figures, with the exception of the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020/21.

Missing Incidents Adults and Children, E&W



- As with previous years, reports of missing children make up nearly two thirds of all missing person incidents in E&W.
- Police Scotland reported 7,050 missing child incidents. 49% of their incidents related to missing children and 51% to missing adults.
- PSNI reported 4,712 missing child incidents. 52.9 % of incidents related to missing children and 47.1% related to missing adults.

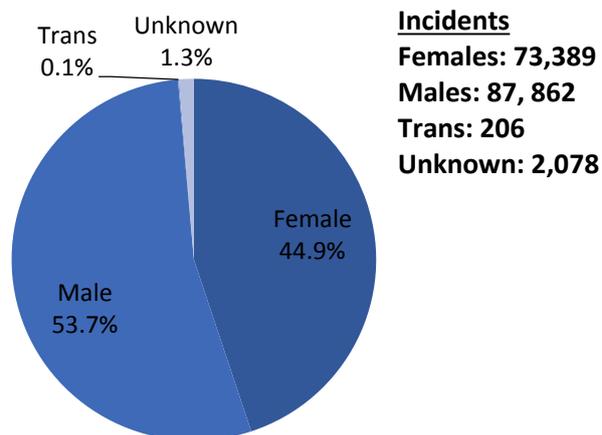
Missing Related Calls and Population – Table B1 in the statistical report
(Returns received from 38 forces, Police Scotland and PSNI)



- There were 3.8 calls per 1,000 persons in the United Kingdom. This is a reduction from the 2019/20 figures, which saw a rate of 6.0 calls per 1,000.
- E&W saw a rate of 4.1 calls per 1,000 population. Cleveland had the highest rate per 1,000 population with 8.1 calls, whilst West Mercia had the lowest rate with 2.1 calls per 1,000 population.
- Police Scotland had a rate of 2.7 calls per 1,000 population.
- PSNI had a rate of 2.89 *adult* missing person reports per 1,000 population and 10.68 *child* missing person reports. PSNI do not provide statistics relating to calls.^b

Missing Incidents and Gender – Tables B2 (data from 38 police forces) and Table C1 (returns received from 23 police forces) in the statistical report

Gender Distribution in Missing Incidents

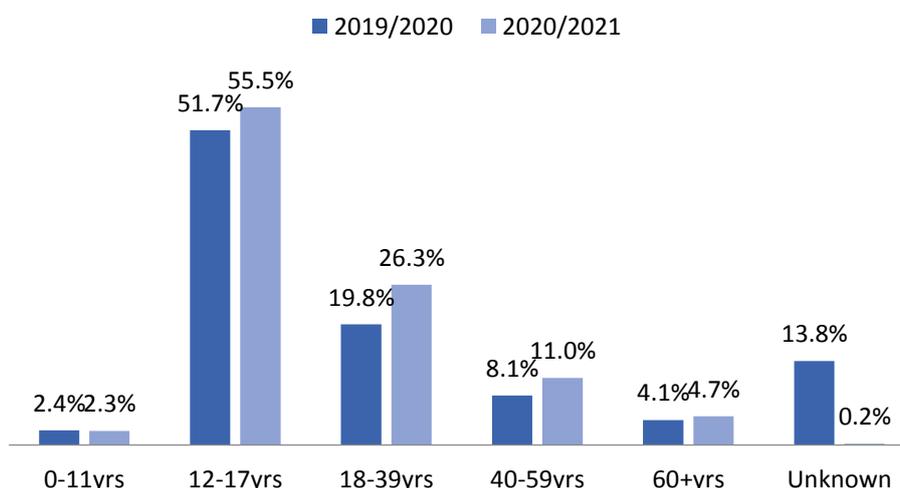


- As in previous years, a consistent finding across E&W was that there were more reported missing incidents involving males than females. There has been a slight increase in the percentage of females being reported as missing, up from 43.4% in 2019/20 to 44.9% in 2020/21

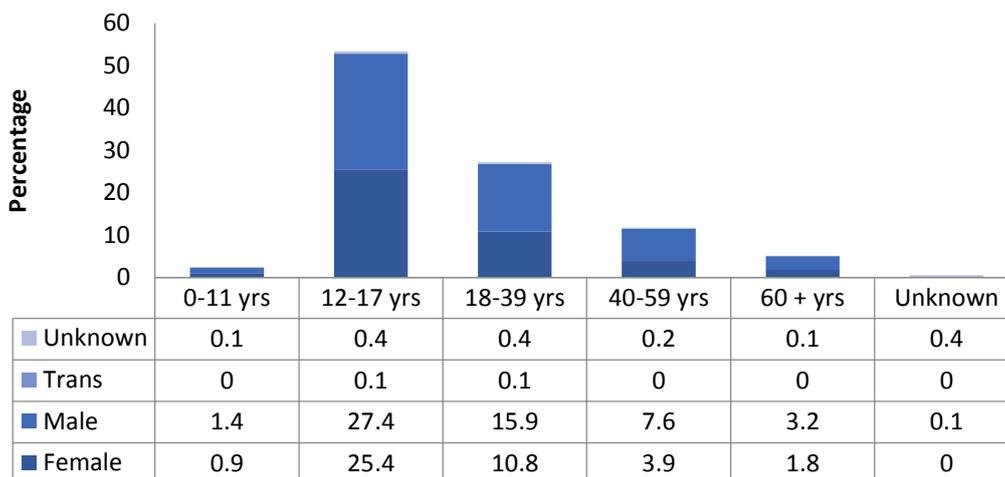
^b Police Service of Northern Ireland Missing Persons Overview 2020/2021 Financial Year, author C142699 29/12/2021.

- There has been a significant reduction in the percentage of incidents where the gender has been recorded as 'unknown' – making up just 1% of the incidents in 2020/21 compared to 7.4% of all incidents in 2019/20. This is likely due to better reporting standards within police forces.
- Police Scotland reported that 44.1% of all incidents involved females, 55.1% involved males, 0.6% involved trans and in 0.2% the gender was unknown.
- PSNI reported that 44.1% of all incidents involved females, 55.8% of all incidents involved males and trans represented 0.1%.

Distribution of incidents of missing by age groups 2019-2021



Age and Gender in E&W - Incidents



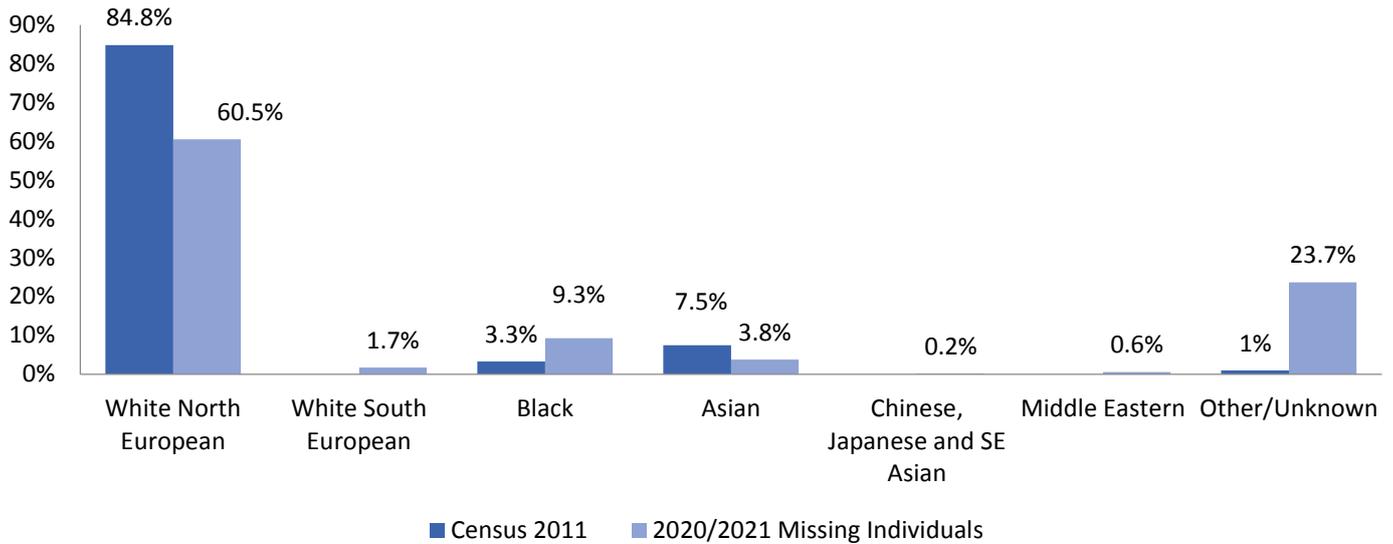
- The above shows the percentage breakdown across all missing incidents.
- The gender breakdown for each age group is consistent with previous years' returns. The 12-17 years age group accounts for the largest proportion of incidents for both males and females. Typically this age group have more repeat missing episodes and over-reporting (for example, children not returning home on time). These are echoed in the data from Police Scotland, wherein 47.3% of their missing incidents are attributable to the 12-17 years age group (or 6,707 incidents), with the second largest group being 18-39 years, which accounted for 31.2% of their missing incidents (4,480 incidents).
- PSNI record their age breakdowns in a different age groupings to E&W and so a direct comparison is not possible.

Ethnicity and Missing – Table C3 in the statistical report (Returns received from 35 forces)

As seen in previous years, individuals identifying as Black, Asian, Mixed Race or from any other Ethnic background continue to be over-represented in missing person reports. The 2021 Census results^c have not been released at the time of writing so the comparison below is based on the 2011 Census. Some areas are not comparable due to variations in how the data is recorded (for example, the Census does not ask persons who identify as White to determine if they are White North European or White South European).

^c The Census data is available at <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/uk-population-by-ethnicity/national-and-regional-populations/population-of-england-and-wales/latest>

Ethnicity of Missing Persons Compared to Demographics of E&W



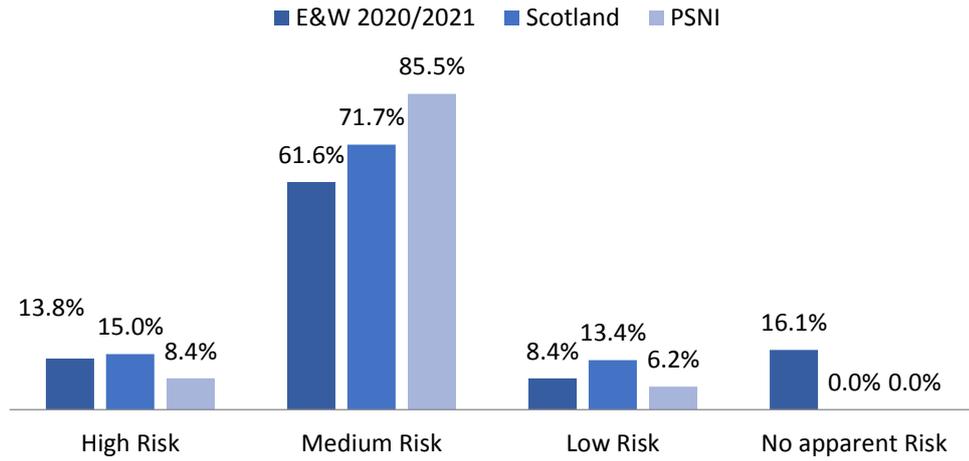
- The reasons why certain minority groups are over-represented in missing person reports are not yet fully understood and are multi-faceted:
 - Lack of representation in health care and social care settings may result in people from those demographics being less likely to access help and support.
 - Significant stigma within certain cultures around mental health may also result in those issues not being addressed and medical assistance not being sought; again a possible reason for some minorities being over-represented in missing reports.

- The NCA is currently working with the University of Portsmouth and Goldsmiths University of London to look at a number of factors affecting over-representation in missing person reports. We hope that these findings will be published soon.

Risk – Table D1 in the statistical report (Returns received from 33 forces)

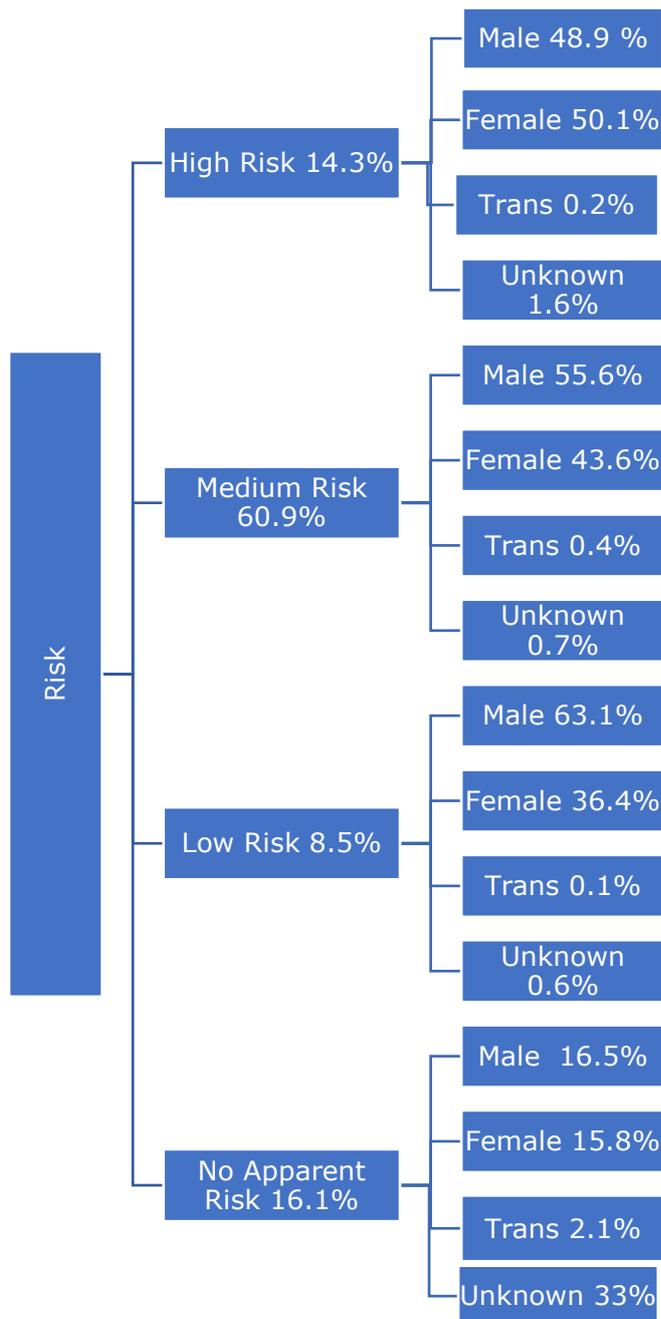
The risk breakdown has remained similar to previous years returns, with medium risk being the most common risk grading given to missing person incidents.

Risk Continuum

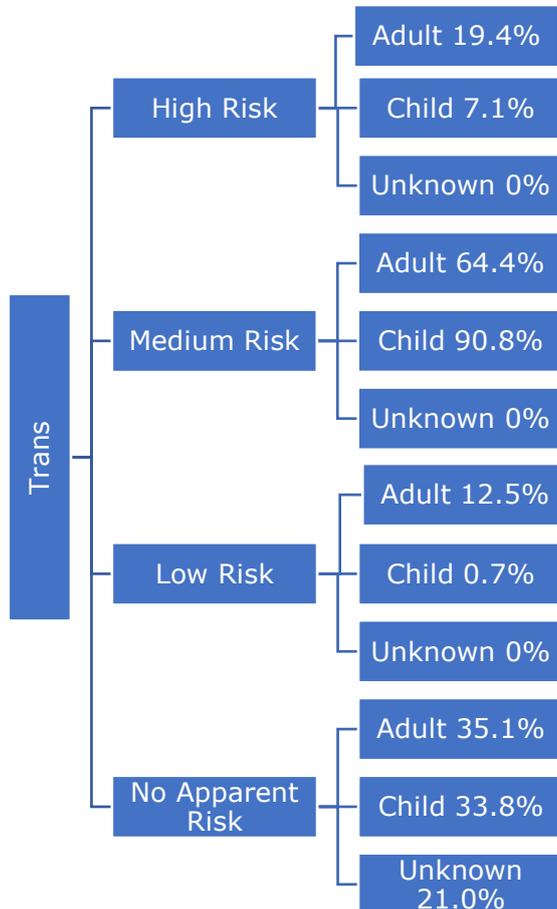
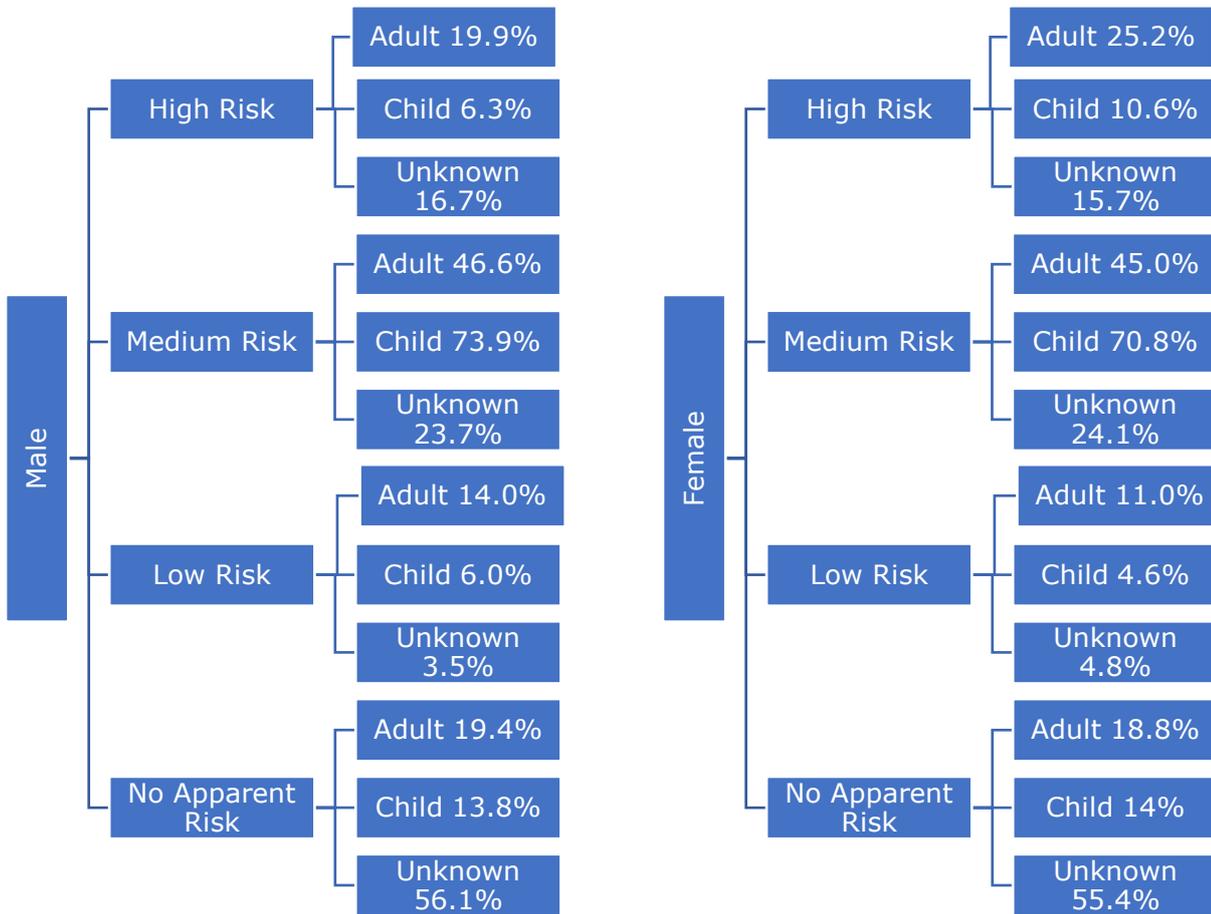


- Police Scotland have a risk-based definition for missing, which may account for their different distribution of risk; those persons who are reported as missing are already defined as being vulnerable to some element of risk.
- PSNI also provide a breakdown of risk for persons missing from specific locations (such as from a residential address or from a hospital). Full details are available in their annual report.

Risk, Gender and Age – Table D2 in the statistical report (Returns received from 35 forces)



- It is unclear why males represent 63.1% of all low risk missing incidents, whilst females account for just 36.4%. It could be insinuated that cultural stereotypes/pre-conceptions are that males are more capable of looking after themselves and females are inherently more vulnerable, thus impacting the risk assessment made.

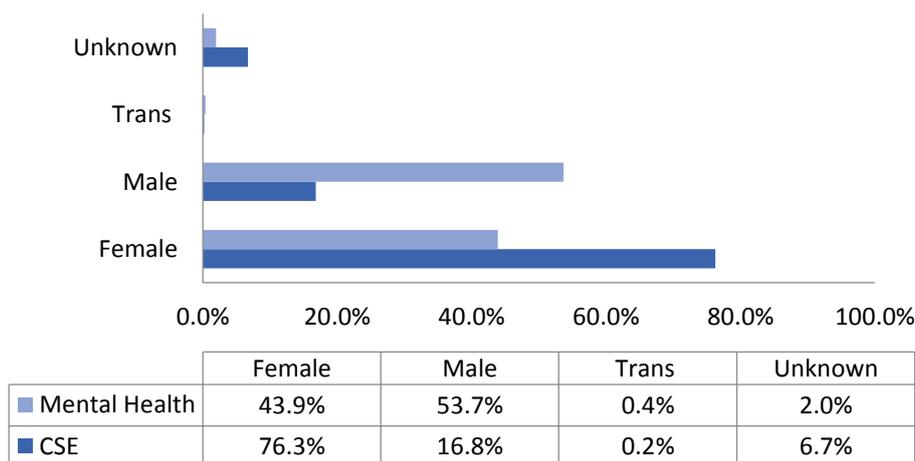


- The female, male and trans diagrams show percentages calculated based on the total number of incidents for the group gender and age.
- Femles account for a marginally higher proportion of high risk missing person incidents than males, whereas males are more prevalent in medium and low risk incidents.
- The most significant difference can be seen in low risk missing incidents, with 63.1% of incidents being attributable to males and just 36.1% to females. This may be a result of more female children being reported as missing than males. A number of forces have adopted a blanket policy of using a medium risk assessment for children, which will skew the results.
- Trans children are much more likely to be recorded as medium risk, which is much higher than female and male children. This could be due to the fact that trans children are likely to be receiving help and support through their transition, and so the reporting person may have access to, or be able to provide more detailed information around, their risk and vulnerability.

Vulnerability, Gender and Age – Tables D3, D4 and D5 in the statistical report
(Returns received from 34 forces)

- Forces are able to place a mental health flag^d or Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) flag on their systems to denote that the incident involves either (or both) of those vulnerabilities.

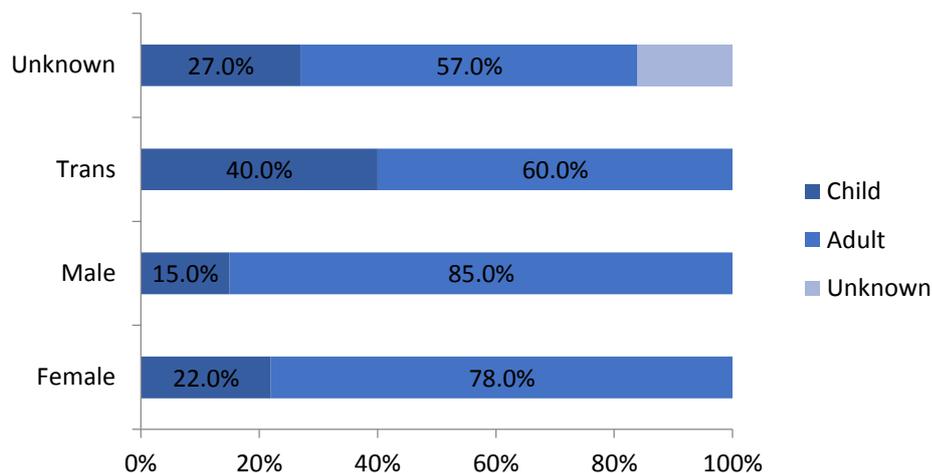
Vulnerability Type and Gender E&W



^d Flags are markers placed in missing person case management systems to alert a user to particular vulnerabilities.

- A considerably higher proportion of females are shown to have CSE markers. It is possible that CSE is under reported for males to some extent.
- From 2000 to 2014, rates of common mental health problems in England steadily increased in women and remained largely stable in men^e. Despite slightly more men having mental health markers within the data collated for this report, it may well be the case that mental health issues are also underreported for the male population.
- Police Scotland figures are similar to E&W with 56.4% of cases with a mental health flag being male and 42.5% relating to females.
- Police Scotland were unable to provide data around CSE flags.
- PSNI data for vulnerability was provided in a format that could not be used for comparison.

Mental Health Flags - Age and Gender



- 81.1% (50,458 incidents) of 62,254 missing person incidents with a mental health flag were attributed to adults and 18.6% (11,580 incidents) were attributed to children.
- There are no clear reasons why adults make up 81.1% of the incidents with a mental health flag, despite the fact that 1 in 6 children are affected by mental health problems.^f
- Children account for 40% of incidents involving persons who identify as trans and have a mental health marker.

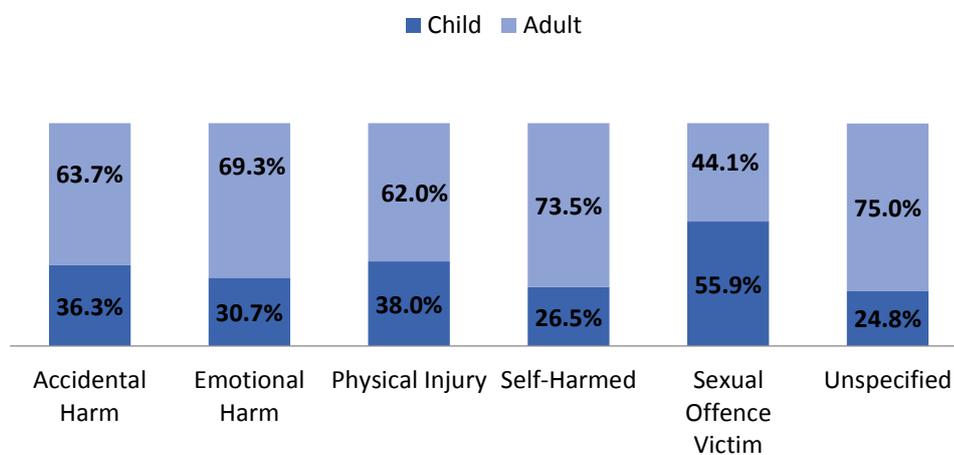
^e McManus S, Bebbington P, Jenkins R, Brugha T (eds.) (2016) *Mental Health and Wellbeing in England: Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey 2014*. Leeds: NHS Digital.

^f www.mentalhealth.org.uk

Nature of Harm Suffered and Fatal Outcomes – Tables E1, E2 and E3 in the statistical report (Returns received from 23 forces)

- A total of 97,921 incidents were returned from forces that resulted in some form of harm.
- 95.2% of 97,921 incidents resulted in no harm being suffered by the missing person.
- 2.4% of child missing incidents resulted in harm being suffered.
- 9.1% of adult missing incidents resulted in harm being suffered.

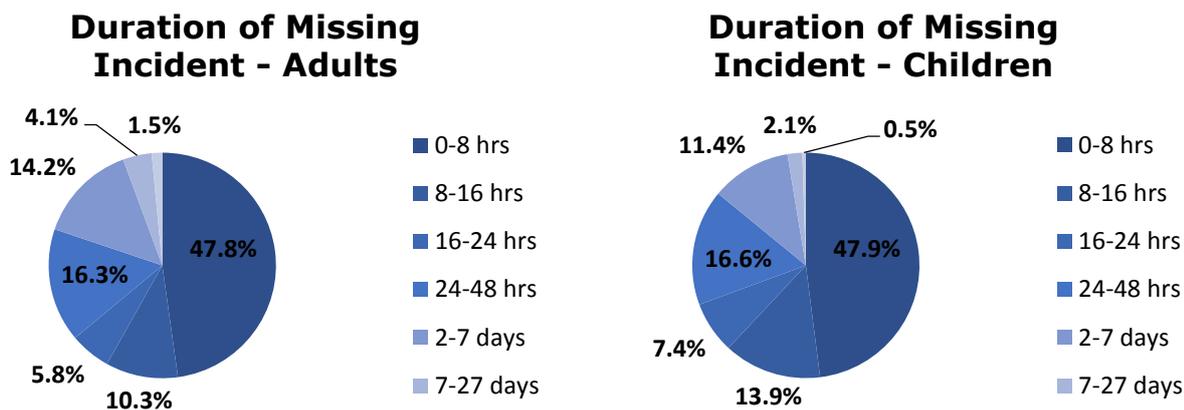
Nature of Harm Suffered



- For unspecified harm 0.2% of cases could not be attributed to a child or adult.
- It is possible for forces to record more than one type of harm when closing a missing person incident.
- It is difficult for forces to record all types of harm suffered by individuals during the missing episode. For many people, they may not feel ready to disclose to police exactly what has happened whilst they have been missing. This is likely to be true for victims of sexual offences and so this is an area that is likely to be under-reported and under recorded.
- Some harm suffered can be easily identified; physical injury and self-harm are mostly visible and so can be quickly identified and recorded by police officers. Emotional harm, however, is not so easily identified as it is reliant on the now found person disclosing the harm.
- There were 808 recorded fatal outcomes in missing person incidents (21 involving children) reported by E&W, PSNI and Police Scotland, which was a 13% reduction from 2019/20.

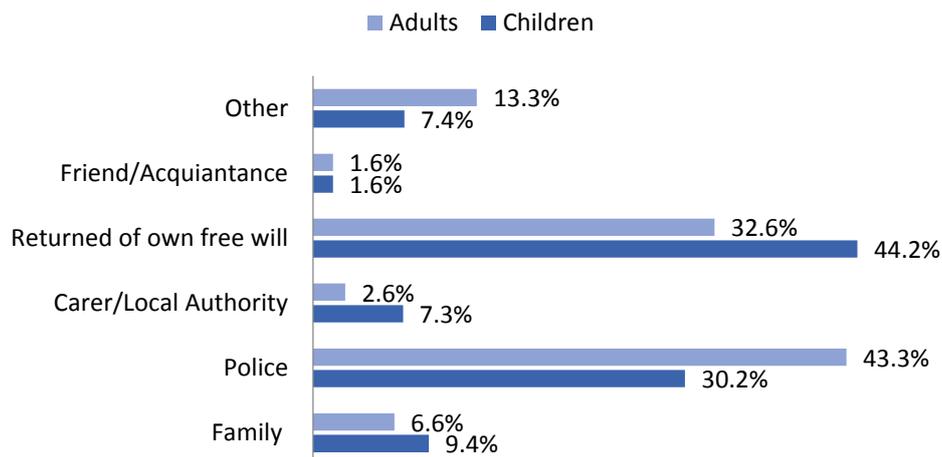
Duration, Who Finds Missing People and Missing From Care – Tables E4, E5 and F1 in the statistical report (Returns received from 28 forces)

- Most missing person incidents were resolved within 2 days of being reported:
 - 80.2% adults and 85.8% of children in E&W.
 - 90.7% of adults and 97.9% of children in Northern Ireland.
 - 92.2 % of adults and 97.1% of children in Police Scotland.
 - It is not understood what leads Police Scotland and PSNI to have a higher percentage resolution rate during those initial 48 hours.
- 0.8% of all missing incidents were still unresolved after 28 days.
- The duration of missing incidents for adults and children in E&W is similar, with children remaining missing for a shorter time overall.



- There are 11,608 long term missing individuals recorded on police systems in E&W, Police Scotland and PSNI. These are cases that were reported as missing prior to 1st April 2020 and who were still missing as of 31st March 2021. 58% of the long term missing cases related to individuals missing from the Metropolitan Police area. The overall rise in long term missing figures (when compared with the previous data report) appears to be a sharp rise, however, this year the Met were able to provide data which was not available in the last reporting year.
- The number of long term missing includes cases dating from the 1930s, asylum seekers who have been reported as missing after they have failed to attend immigration related interviews with Immigration Enforcement, individuals who have been lost at sea, and individuals who have chosen to go missing. It also incorporates no-body murder cases as these will remain open as missing person cases until remains are located and identified.

Who Finds Missing People E&W Table E5



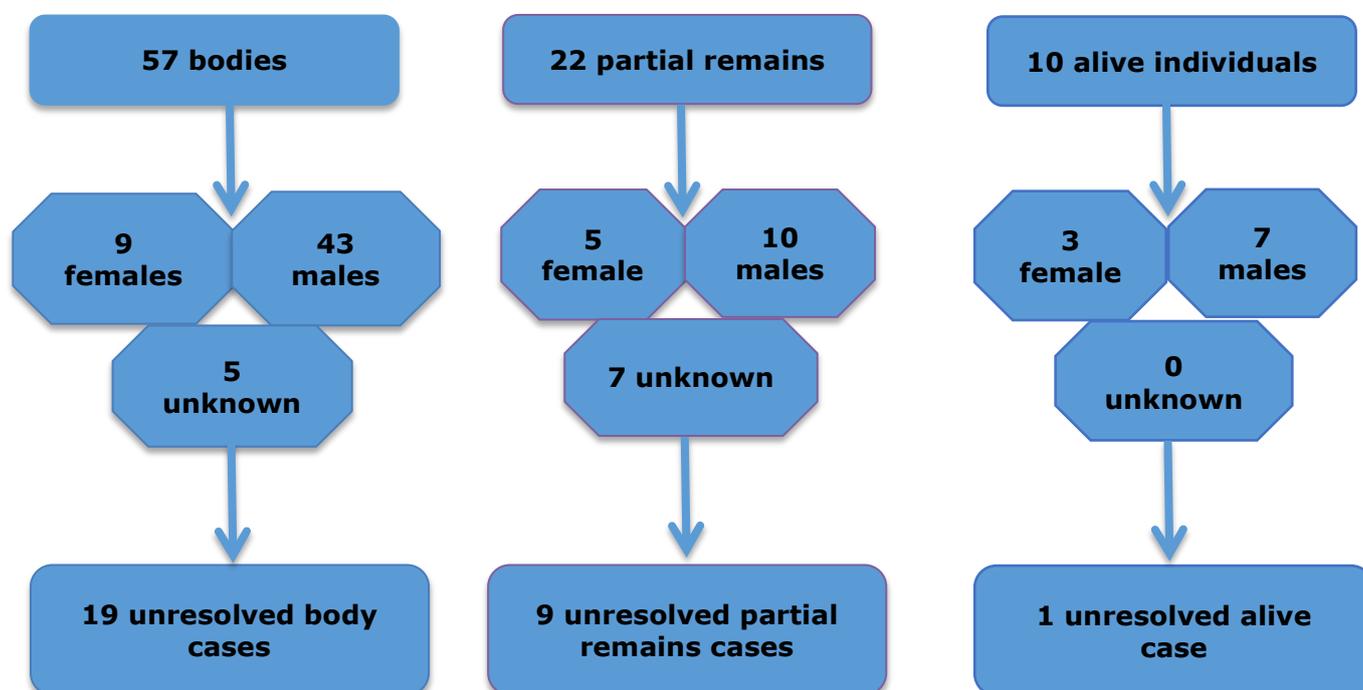
- As seen in previous years, adults are more likely to be found by police and children are more likely to return of their own free will. In Scotland, however, the police are responsible for locating the child in 57.2% of child missing incidents.
- Research is required to understand the effectiveness of publicity appeals so that forces can make informed decisions around releasing media appeals to aid locating a missing person.
- Children reported as missing from care (6,918 individuals) went missing on average 5.5 times, resulting in 38,014 incidents. Although children in care are more likely to be reported as missing because of the professional role of carers⁹, this is unlikely alone to be the reason for the increased prevalence of missing incidents. It is well recognised that children in care have experienced adverse childhood experiences that sometimes increase their vulnerability.
- Children who were reported as missing from home (not in care) (28,712 individuals) had on average 2.2 incidents of missing, resulting in 64,161 incidents.
- There was little difference in the number of times an adult is reported as missing whether they were in care or not; adults in care had 1.5 incidents of missing per individual, compared with 1.3 for adults who weren't in care.

⁹ Hayden, C. and J. Goodship, (2013) Children reported missing to the police: Is it possible to risk assess every incident? *British Journal of Social Work* 45 (2).

Unidentified Found People and Remains – Table G1 and G2 in the statistical report (Data taken directly from UKMPU database)

The UKMPU collects information from police forces on individuals who are found alive but cannot be immediately identified. These individuals may be unable to provide personal details at the time of being found for reasons such as injuries sustained or medical conditions, e.g. amnesia or dementia.

Information is also collected from police forces and coroners on unidentified deceased bodies and remains (body parts), and from overseas law enforcement agencies where it is believed there may be a link to the UK. The UKMPU stores this information on its database, Hermes, and uses it, together with details of missing person reports, to cross match (link) the missing and the found. These figures are inclusive of Police Scotland and PSNI.



Compared to 2019/20, the number of unidentified cases notified to the UKMPU increased noticeably in the 2020/21 reporting year (in 2019/20 there were 42 bodies, 5 partial remains and 5 alive individuals). It may be the case that lockdown brought a greater influx of the public exploring their localities, as all other leisure activities were closed, resulting in more persons/body parts being found, or that the pressures of COVID-19 and repeat lockdowns resulted in an increase in the rate of suicide. The figures for the numbers of suicides in 2021 are not yet available.

As of 31st March 2021, the UKMPU held 978 unidentified cases across the UK.

This includes 771 bodies, 148 body parts and 59 alive individuals. For many of the alive individuals, these will be cases of alive, abandoned babies, therefore longstanding cases on the UKMPU database Hermes.

When including cases notified by the Crown Dependencies, Ministry of Defence Police and those found overseas, the UKMPU maintains details of 1,068 unresolved unidentified cases.

Records held by the UKMPU date back to the 1950s and many of the unresolved cases are historic remains located prior to the development of DNA analysis as a means of identifying individuals or body parts. Sadly, it is unlikely that those cases will be identified, however, work continues to identify new lines of enquiry in the hope of an identification being made.

Glossary

Absent^h

A person not at a place where they are expected or required to be. From January 2017 the absent category was discontinued, with all cases classified as missing. All reports of missing are risk assessed into four categories: high, medium, low and 'no apparent risk'. Effectively, absent and no apparent risk are treated as one. Where a police force has provided data on absent cases, these have been added to the missing cases reported by that force to show an overall missing total.

Call

A call is a report of a missing person received by a police force, which is logged onto a Command and Control system.

Child

Anyone under the age of 18 years.

Command and Control system

A system used for the recording and management of information relating to incidents received by a police service control room, and the subsequent allocation and management of police resources.

COMPACT

A missing person case management system in use in 20ⁱ police forces.

CSE

Child Sexual Exploitation flags or markers may be added to incidents where the police there is or may be an element or risk of CSE. this to be the case.

Duration missing

The time between when a person is recorded as missing by the police and when the police record that a person has been found or has returned.

Gender identity

Provided by the individual reporting the person missing, not self-defined.

Harm suffered

Includes; accidental and emotional harm, physical injury, self-harmed, and sexual offences.

Incident

A single episode of a person/persons being reported as missing to the police.

Individual

^h As stated in the Authorised Police Practice on Missing.

ⁱ Reported number of police forces using Compact or Niche based on data supplied in the 2019/20 return (Table H1).

A person who has been reported missing, which is recorded by the police. One person may be recorded as being missing on more than one incident.

Long-term missing

These are those individuals reported missing prior to the current reporting year and who are still missing on the last day of the reporting year, for example for the reporting year 2019/20 this includes all individuals missing prior to 1st April 2019 and who are still missing on 31st March 2020.

Missing^j

Anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established will be considered as missing until they have been located and their well-being or otherwise is confirmed.

Missing persons system

A case management system used by the police to manage the investigation of missing person cases.

Niche

A records management system also used as a missing person case management system in 16^k police forces.

Risk

All reports of missing people sit within a continuum of risk, from 'no apparent risk' through to high-risk cases that require immediate, intensive action. The 2017 College of Policing Authorised Professional Practice^l guidance states:

- No apparent risk - actions to locate the subject and/or gather further information should be agreed with the informant and a latest review time set to reassess the risk.
- Low risk - proportionate enquiries should be carried out to ensure that the individual has not come to harm.
- Medium risk - this category requires an active and measured response by the police and other agencies in order to trace the missing person and support the person reporting.
- High risk - this category almost always requires the immediate deployment of police resources and involvement from senior management.

^j As defined by the College of Policing APP on Missing Persons. The definition of missing differs in Scotland and is described as "Anyone whose whereabouts is unknown and where the circumstances are out of character OR the context suggests the person may be subject to crime OR the person is at risk of harm to themselves or another".

^k Reported number of police forces using Compact or Niche based on data supplied in the 2019/20 return (Table H1).

^l www.college.police.uk/app/content/major-investigation-and-public-protection/missing-persons/