



Missing Person Psychology

# The Behavioural Characteristics of Missing People

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# Missing People...

Every missing person report is unique

Each missing person has their own reason for being missing

Unique as they are, missing people have many behavioural characteristics in common

Approximately 250,000 people go missing every year in Britain.

Every missing person report is unique. Each missing person has their own reasons and motives for being missing, and reasons for why they may or may not return home.

Mental health issues, family problems, substance addiction, suffering forms of abuse, and financial issues are the most commonly reported stressful events which are believed to contribute to the decision to go missing.

More worryingly, murder, kidnap, human trafficking, and foul play are also frequently observed among cases of missing people.

The focal point of our research is to examine behaviours which are commonly displayed by people who go missing - before, during, and concluding the disappearance. The aim of the research was to identify behaviours, events, and social experiences which are significantly linked to people who go missing.

Findings indicated that, although each missing person case is unique, there are behaviours, events, and social factors which are commonly observed among several cases, confirming our hypothesis.



# Unplanned and Unintended Missing Episodes

*There is a clear difference in the behaviours and overall social and emotional environments of people who intended to go missing, and those who did not.*

*The absence of factors which contribute to an individual's decision to go missing strongly indicate the possibility of a serious, and more sinister outcome.*

## **Intended and unintended missing episodes**

There is a clear difference in the behaviours and overall social and emotional environments of missing people who intended to go missing, and those who did not.

It is a common assumption that deciding to go away, or missing, is simply a 'snap' decision and has not been considered, planned, and thought out for some time – this simply is not the case.

Our research has identified a range of behaviours which display the planning of a missing episode, and the factors which may have contributed to each person's decision to go away.

Further to this, our research has identified that friends and family members of missing people were often able to predict that the individual would go missing, and what their reasons and motives for doing so were.

We have identified three specific 'types' of missing people, who went missing of their own accord, and observed behavioural characteristics associated with each type.

In relation to those who did not intend to be missing, we observed an obvious and significant contrast in the lives and behaviours of people who did not choose to go missing, or are missing against their will.

The missing person cases reviewed in the present study displayed a range of motives for being missing, and many factors which contributed to the planning and carrying out of the missing episode.

The data recorded in the present study was gathered from 56 detailed published accounts of British missing person cases. The sample consisted of an age range from 0 – over 61 years of age.

Seven 'types' of missing person were identified and defined by their motives and/or reasons for being missing. Each type displayed a range of behaviours and factors which were significantly related to them.



# Runaways

*(An individual who chooses to go missing of their own accord)*

- Several social 'push factors' were observed and significantly associated with runaways.
- 'Pull factors' also indicated what the person may be running to, rather than from.
- Runaways indicated planning behaviours and strong indicators of their intentions to leave.
- Although runaways went missing of their own accord, many were not secretive, or avoidant of their social environment.

## **Runaway**

The term runaway is widely discussed within missing person research; and self-explanatorily defines itself as 'an individual who chooses to go missing of their own accord'.

Runaways are generally associated with missing teenagers and young adults. Within our sample, the majority were aged between thirteen and eighteen years, and were suffering from depression – undiagnosed. Alongside reports of depression, runaways have shown to display behaviours indicative of social withdrawal in the build up to the act of going missing.

Many possible indicators of what these individuals were running from, or 'push-factors' were significantly linked to several cases. Many of such push-factors are commonly associated with high levels of psychological and emotional distress - such as family arguments, failure in educational achievements, being the victim of a form of abuse, and being arranged to be married against one's wishes.

Alternatively, the individual may be running to another way of life, person, or area. Many runaways were significantly more likely to have, made a new group of friends prior to the episode, or planned to run away with their partner.

Runaways are often not secretive of their actions as they embark on their missing episode, as many leave behind evidence of their planning and preparation for the disappearance. Many may also display a 'statement' behaviour, such as leaving the keys to their home in a place they will easily be found. It is feasible to suggest that this act indicates the individual is 'stating' "I'm going and I'm not coming back". Such an act displays commitment to the decision to go missing, and stay missing.

Despite this, many did not appear to avoid being found; as many had stayed with friends and relatives during the episode, and the majority were located by the police.

## Push-aways

*(An individual who is physically or psychologically forced from their home)*

- Several personally distressing events are significantly associated with push-aways
- These individuals do not attempt to hide their intentions before and at the time of the missing episode, and often indicate plans for a long term missing episode.
- Push-aways are significantly more likely to remain missing and display signs of beginning a 'new life' elsewhere.

Similar to runaways, a range of emotionally distressing events and circumstances are significantly linked to 'push-aways'. The difference however, is in the terminology. These individuals choose to go missing - but the decision to leave is due to the fact that they have been physically or psychologically forced from their home.

Issues within the home are significantly associated with this type of missing person. The majority reported family arguments, family separation, openly admitting that they were gay or bisexual to their family, and reported being the victim of a form of abuse prior to the missing episode.

A significant number were also reported to suffer from depression, became socially withdrawn and 'out of character' prior to the episode.

Push-aways tended to display behaviours which suggested that they intended to be away for a lengthy period - or possibly never return.

The majority had left home with their personal belongings, clothing, passport, money, and - like runaways - has left behind the keys to their home.

The panning out of the missing episode supports the evidence which suggested that the individual intended to be away for some time. During the episode, push-aways had reported travelling, using private accommodation, gaining employment, and repeatedly withdrawing money.

Sadly, a number of individuals among this particular type, had turned to prostitution as a means of financial gain during the episode, and many had used an alias to avoid detection.

Only 25% of push-aways returned to their homes after being located and after the closure of the missing person investigation.

## Drift-aways

*(An individual who gradually loses contact with their friends and family over time, and whose whereabouts become unknown)*

- Poor physical health, and necessary medical intervention, is strongly associated with this particular type of missing person.
- Diagnosed mental illness, and other forms of mental illness, are significantly associated with drift-aways.
- As is the breakdown of a significant relationship prior to the missing episode.
- Indications prior to the episode suggest that the person wishes to withdraw from their social surroundings and spend time away from their home.

The drift-away is defined by their behaviour before and during the missing episode. These missing people have gradually drifted away from their home environment, families, friends, and possibly their social environment.

The breakdown of relationships and/or divorce is significantly linked to this type of missing person, prior to the episode.

The role of the health of the individual has shown to be a significant factor in cases of drift aways, with many suffering from one or more physical illnesses. 100% of the drift-away sample, in this particular study, were also diagnosed with a mental illness and were taking prescribed medication at the time they went missing. The majority reported suffering from a form of neurosis, such as mild depression, anxiety, or panic disorder, alongside other mental health issues.

Reviews of cases discussed the role of health problems among this type of missing people, and many maintained that such individuals do not wish to 'burden' their families with the responsibility for their care. The presence of depression, and associated emotional distress, is likely to amplify negative thoughts and beliefs the individual may have in relation to the impact of their poor health on their family.

Drift-aways did not display a great desire to hide, or remain missing, as 100% of this particular sample were seen in public, and the sighting was reported to investigators. Although the majority did travel during the episode.



# Suicide

*(An individual who is has chosen to go missing in order to commit suicide)*

- Prolonged stressful circumstances, prior to the missing episode, were significantly linked to missing people who commit suicide.
- Behavioural and personality changes were also reported prior to the episode.
- Evidence of preparation and planning the missing episode and suicide is often found.

In relation to suicide, the missing episode is simply the vehicle which enables them to go to commit the act without being disturbed, seen, or saved. Such individuals are more likely to go missing to commit suicide, if they have previously attempted suicide unsuccessfully.

As maintained in the majority of previous suicide research, the role of mental illness is prevalent among missing people who commit suicide; with 100% of cases, in this sample, suffering depression in addition to a decline in mental health prior to the missing episode. Other social factors observed were likely to have also contributed to the decline in mental health and the decision to go missing:

Suicidal missing people were significantly associated with unemployment or losing their job, high levels of occupational stress, and substance use and/or dependency.

Planning and preparation for the suicide missing episode echoes previous findings, which identify that the behaviours and personality of the individual is likely to change in the build up to their suicide.

The majority of suicidal people in left evidence of planning the episode. Such planning behaviours often consist of organising financial affairs, preparing the location and method of suicide, and saying goodbye to people.

100% of missing people in the sample were alone as they went missing to commit suicide; indicating that they fully intended to end their lives without the chance of someone saving them.

# Accidental death

*(An individual who has died accidentally in circumstances which leads their whereabouts to be unknown)*

- Psychoses were significantly associated with missing people who were killed accidentally – it is a possibility that the mental illness induced the behaviours which resulted in the circumstances of the death.
- Behaviours reported prior to the missing episode indicate ‘nothing out of the ordinary’ and that the individual fully intended to return home.
- Substance use is significantly related to accidental death, in missing person cases.

The time lapse between someone being accidentally killed and the realisation that they are not coming home, commonly results in a missing person report.

Causes of accidental death associated with missing people include drowning in canals/rivers/seas/ etc., overdose, falls in remote places, and road accidents.

In comparison to planned missing episodes, there is a dramatic reduction in any of the factors which are believed to contribute to an individual's decision to go missing. Behaviours immediately before the episode indicate that each individual had planned to go about a 'normal' day and were fully intending to return home.

Half of the sample were found to have suffered from a form of psychosis, such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder, which may have influenced erratic unsafe behaviour - resulting in the accidental death.

A further contributing factor may be due to the fact that half of the sample group were found to have consumed alcohol and/or drugs just before their death - also likely to have led to unsafe behaviour which resulted in the accidental death.

As a missing person investigation, the role of substance use has shown to hinder many investigations. Friends and/or relatives of the missing person may not inform investigators that it is likely that the missing individual has taken drugs, for fear of them facing charges when they are found.

This provides investigators with a challenging investigation. The thoughts and emotions of a sober person are very different from those of an intoxicated individual - therefore, the behaviour during the missing episode would differ between the two scenarios.

Our findings support recent publications which are identifying questionable areas of public safety, and suggested improvements in prevention of accidental injury and death.



# Murder & Foul Play

*(An individual who is missing against their will - due to the fact that they have been murdered, kidnapped, or have been victims of other forms of foul play)*

- A significant absence of personal problems, mental illness, physical illness, and other factors which are associated with missing people was observed among individuals who were missing against their will.
- Behavioural indicators reported suggested that the murder/ foul play victim was fully intent in returning home and areas of their life were 'normal' prior to the missing episode.
- Inferences can be made, in the early stages of a missing person report, from the absence of planning behaviours - indicates a person is missing against their will.

Similarly to the accidental death sample, there is a significant absence of factors which have shown to contribute to planned missing episodes. These findings are representative of missing people who were murdered, kidnapped, victims of a form of foul play, or were otherwise taken and held against their will.

This particular study however, reports a significant link between missing people who have been murdered and their involvement in an extra marital affair, prior to the episode. This may suggest a motive for the murder in some cases.

In terms of missing person research, the attention of several cases is often placed on the act of murder or foul play.

The mechanics and occurrences of the events between the last sighting of the person and where they went, or were taken to, are often non-descript when reviewing individual cases. Further analyses of such events may provide answers to why the missing person had taken a particular route? Could they have avoided the events which led to their disappearance? Had they tried to get out of the negative situation that resulted in their disappearance? Were they the only person to suffer in this particular place? Were they aware of dangers and risks they were exposed to on a daily basis, were they 'streetwise'?

Our findings offer very little as a means of preventing future murders. However, the findings do report an obvious difference in the behaviours of individuals who intended to go missing, and those who were missing against their will, prior to the episode.

Identifying the possibility that the person is missing against their will in the earliest possible stages of the investigation provides higher levels of accuracy in risk assessments, and prevents serious mistakes during the investigation - as have been observed in several high profile cases.



# Missing People

This research completely contradicts any suggestion that missing people can be regarded as a general population.

Although each case is unique, being able to define a missing person as a 'type' indicates possible contributing factors to the episode, whether or not the episode was planned, the likelihood that they will return, and ultimately their safety.

Our research has proven that each type of missing person has their own significant risk factors, motives, thought processes plans, and reasons for being missing. Therefore, it is unreasonable to discuss missing people as a generalised population in future developmental research and improvements to policing and investigative tools.

Although the general rule of thumb, in missing person investigations, is to assume the worst outcome until proven otherwise; identifying behavioural characteristics and associating them with a template 'type' of missing person could provide positive direction to an investigation and risk assessment.

Our findings highlight the urgent need for research which provides a deeper understanding of the thought processes, narratives, and emotions of missing people.



# Implications

Many of the discussed behaviours, and circumstances, which bring about the onset of the decision to go missing may appear obvious; as does the fact that many missing episodes are meticulously thought out and planned.

Despite this, many of these behavioural indicators are currently overlooked in several methods of safeguarding, investigation, and prevention of future missing episodes.

There is always room for improvement in policing, research, and investigative methods.

Introducing research which discusses the thought processes, emotions, and lives of 'types' of missing people has the potential to greatly improve areas in policing, social care, training professionals, support for missing people and their families, and paves the way for a new focal point of future research.

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There is always room for improvement in policing, research, and investigative methods.

At present, it is no secret that research around missing people, and associated organisations, are currently in need of improvement - a subject which is repeatedly publicised by organisations which provide support to missing people and their families.

The introduction of expertise from outside research disciplines have the potential to contribute enormously to future missing person research and improvements in policing. This area covers mental health, social care, substance addiction, geographical and environmental psychology, forensics , criminology, policing, search and rescue, and many more areas of research.

Hopefully, researchers, police, support organisations, will continue to join forces to continuously improve the understanding of missing people.

# Thank you

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