Vulnerability & Policing Futures
Research Centre

Recognising the risks and harms for repeat missing children from different residential environments through a child and practitioner lens

Key points

- Every missing episode is fluid and dynamic, where causes, activities, and harms can vary. Most missing episodes investigated in this study were harmless, with children spending time with friends or missing curfew. But some missing children accessed places, spaces and people in the community unsupervised, and their risks and harms escalated.

- Children living with their parents, other relatives or in foster care were 19 times more likely to go missing repeatedly than children missing from residential care ("looked-after" children). Despite this, interventions and safeguarding endeavours prioritise repeatedly missing looked-after children. As a result, the harms and risks for missing children who live with their parents, other relatives, or in foster care were frequently overlooked.

- Police and social services are the main partners responding to repeatedly missing children. Other partners, who possess key information about the children, were infrequently involved. This leaves a significant knowledge gap and reduces the ability to implement multi-agency arrangements for harm-reduction and safeguarding needs successfully.

Summary

It is insufficient to believe that just because repeatedly missing children (RMC) did not experience harm in one episode, they will remain safe and unharmed in the following occurrences. Each episode must be explored to understand the child's unique circumstances and needs.

However, the priority in policy, practice, and research has been looked-after children. This means that the needs of non-looked-after children, i.e. those who live with parents, other relatives or in foster care, are overlooked and minimised. This can result in faulty interventions by services, incorrect understandings of the child's needs, and omitting relevant partners.

This research aimed to investigate how risks and harms vary by the child's home type (e.g., with parents, in residential or foster care, or with other relatives) and how practitioners utilise this information to prevent harm and reduce missing occurrences. Practitioners from different public bodies provided their experiences and perspectives on RMC and relevant interventions.

Background

If a child goes missing, it is an indicator that something is wrong in the child's life. Push factors force a child to leave a situation or make them feel unwelcome. Conversely, pull factors entice a child to leave. A child's home environment can be protective or a contributing factor to them leaving.

When the Rotherham and Rochdale sexual exploitation scandals were uncovered in the UK, the victims were discovered to be predominantly young girls missing from care. The victims had multiple missing episodes, with their struggles in residential care viewed as the primary reason for their disappearances. The failures of multiple agencies to tackle the pervasive child sexual exploitation (CSE) have led to calls at both a national and local level to prevent this type of harm. Yet, this lens presumes that only looked-after-children are at risk of CSE, resulting in initiatives targeting this demographic only. This comes at the expense of non-looked after children, where their risks and harms are minimised, overlooked, or poorly understood.

It is not just children living in residential care who experience issues. Every home has its problems: whether it be issues of neglect, substance misuse, or some form of violence. Other people living in the home may also pose a problem for the child. The home is not always a safe and secure place for the child and so returning them to that location can be detrimental to their wellbeing. A lack of understanding from practitioners and academics around the risks and harms in children's homes can result in more harm.

There are multiple initiatives designed to support RMC, but these are primarily tailored to the needs and preferences of one of the partners, not all. They also do not include the child's perspectives. For example, the Levels of Intervention model, devised by the National Police Chiefs' Council, seeks to reduce the burden on the police by initiating responsibility onto parents/carers or residential care staff. However, there is a presumption that these stakeholders can manage this responsibility, which is not always true.

What we did

We analysed police recorded data for 285 RMC from one metropolitan police force between 1 January 2023 and 31 December 2023.

This data was analysed to provide demographic reports on prevalence and patterns. The force also supplied 1,449 Return Home Interviews (RHIs) for the 285 unique children. The data was analysed using a Content Analysis approach. There are five main themes and 26 accompanying sub-themes.

The team conducted four individual semi-structured interviews and three focus groups, consisting of 13 professionals from local authorities, missing from home teams, social services, and police forces. The participants were representative of three local authority/policing geographical areas in England. The data were inductively Thematically Analysed, seeking themes from the participants' perspectives. The interviews and focus groups provided a strategic and operational perspective on responding to, managing, and safeguarding repeatedly missing children. The strategic conversations centred upon government policies, legislation, and broader organisational requirements (e.g., funding, personnel). The operational perspective spoke of the day-to-day engagement with children and partners (social care, police and education).

Key findings

Most RMC in this sample were non-looked-after children, and they were 19 times more likely to go missing repeatedly than looked-after children. Their harms escalated with each missing episode. Despite this knowledge, partners frequently believe that the children who require the most support are looked-after-children. The strategy meetings are devised with these children in mind, and not those who experience the most harm.

- The youngest child in the sample was aged 7 and the oldest 17, with a mean age of 15. There was a minimum of 2 missing episodes and a maximum of 41, with the mean number of episodes being 3.5.

- The most common length of time for the missing episodes was between 8 and 14 hours. However, the findings demonstrate that older children had longer missing episodes, and younger children had shorter ones. The first missing episode tended to be the shortest in the child's series.

- The main harms reported by RMC include physical violence (N = 47), criminal exploitation (N = 36), sexual violence (N = 17), and sexual exploitation (N = 17). These might serve as the reason for going missing, as well as their experiences while missing.

- The harmful causes of their missing episodes were related to mental health difficulties (N = 66), self-harm or suicidal ideations (N = 20), and neurodiversity (N = 13). These causes were exacerbated by the significant waiting lists for both diagnosis and support, creating further episodes.

- The police's recorded data for RMC significantly underestimated the level of risk experienced by children: this data identified only 37 children as experiencing harm, compared to 277 disclosures in the RHIs.

- Once notified of risks and harms, the police do not retrospectively record these on the child's records. Instead, there is an onus on the reporter to notify the police of existing or known harms and risks.

- Response police officers were the primary handlers of the RMC, and both police and social services were critical of this arrangement. They cited concerns with their lack of knowledge about the "bigger picture" in supporting RMC like multi-agency partnership activities, but there were no efforts to involve them in these partnerships.

Next steps

While exploratory, this study demonstrates the substantial and escalating harm which exists for RMC from non-looked-after environments. Children at home, with their parents, were more likely to experience harm, but they are not captured within existing or emerging interventions. Overall, there were patchy processes and a significant lack of understanding of the needs of RMC and their risks and harms.

The following steps would develop more consistent approaches and support harm and occurrence-reduction endeavours:

- To understand risks and harms surrounding missing episodes and effectively create interventions, police must record the child's home type more accurately.

- There needs to be more comprehensive training for responding officers, centred upon why children go missing, how to respond to and interact with them, and what the wider strategy is for harm and reduction occurrences (which is the focus of the specific missing from home teams). It was evident in some of the reports made by the police that they were experiencing compassion fatigue, and this needs more research within the realm of missing persons.

- Parents who reported struggling with their child's missing episodes and needs were subsequently signposted to a Family Intervention Service (hosted by social services in the community). When offered, and the parents engaged, there was a reduction in missing episodes. But this service has since ceased. Some children resumed their missing episodes after the family support stopped. Such services should be understood for their role in reducing missing episodes, while ensuring alternatives are in place if funding ceases.

- Some parents and foster carers were given Buddi Tags for their RMC, as a way of being able to locate them even if their phones were turned off. However, they were still contacting the police. The efficacy of this as a reduction in occurrences, and the child's right to privacy, should be further explored.

- Children frequently reported issues at school, which either directly caused or influenced their missing episodes. However, education representatives were infrequently involved in multi-agency collaborations. They must be incorporated into these partnerships to build intelligence on the child's missing episodes and support safeguarding and intervention endeavours. Similarly, youth workers who complete the RHIs are the ones with rapport with the RMC, and interact with them regularly, yet their services are largely unknown to other agencies, like police and social care. So, they are not included in multi-agency arrangements or meetings. This needs amending for interventions and plans to be effective.

- Practitioners frequently referenced their concerns with continuously developing social media platforms being used to exploit children, either criminally or sexually. This was also demonstrated in the RHIs, with children being exploited, where they were targeted via different social media platforms. This warrants further exploration to understand recruitment techniques and how to disrupt them.

For further information

Scan the QR code to read more about the project.

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