

Demystifying missing persons

Words: Leonie Jacques, Coordinator, National Missing Persons Coordination Centre

A new research project into the missing persons phenomenon aims to provide in-depth knowledge and understanding of the missing persons population, identifying 'at risk' groups and preventative strategies to guide future development of policy and service delivery.

The AFP National Missing Persons Coordination Centre recently signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC) to undertake the national research. The project is jointly funded by the AFP and the Attorney General's Department of NSW (NSWAGD) and will primarily aim to:

- Update existing data on missing persons from all Australian state and territory sources to identify 'at risk' groups, with particular interest in identifying specific characteristics that may or may not define missing persons.
- Identify best practice in relation to preventative measures, early intervention, support services and referral mechanisms.
- Identify opportunities and barriers to a more networked approach to policy

and practice in relation to missing persons and their families.

- Identify and establish a solid base for future research and areas that would benefit from further research.



A steering committee comprising staff from the AFP, NSWAGD, a representative from a non-government search agency, a family/community member and an academic will guide and monitor the progress of the research, which is due for completion early next year.

The research will build on a study commissioned in 1998 by the National Missing Persons Unit, *Missing People: Issues for the Australian Community*. This was seminal research and provided an understanding of the dimensions of the incidence of missing persons and started to unpack some of the associated issues.

Missing persons in Australia

Each year in Australia, more than 30,000 people are reported missing to police and non-police search services – that's 1.61 per 1000 members of the general population.

People go missing for many and varied reasons – sometimes under suspicious circumstances, other times following conflicts within families and other relationships, or as a result of mental health problems.



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Often, people 'choose' to be missing — they simply no longer want contact with family and friends. In other cases, people are missing because of circumstances beyond their or their families' control.

Around 95 in 100 people reported missing to police are located within a short period of time — the missing person returns home or makes contact in around half the cases reported. There are, however, currently 1633 people who have been listed as missing for more than 12 months in Australia.

The location rate is much lower for the non-government search agencies for a variety of reasons including the nature of the searches conducted and the level of access to government information because of privacy considerations.

It has been estimated that for every person reported missing, the impact is felt by 12 others, predominantly family members and friends, but also work colleagues and other community members. Families and friends of missing persons face a range of physical, emotional, psychological and financial impacts. Relationships can be strained as well as significant changes in quality of life and routine activities.

Families and friends of missing persons often find they can't negotiate the normal grieving process as there is no identified death of their loved one. When a relative is missing there is no resolution, only what families have termed 'continuous grieving' or ambiguous loss.

National Missing Persons Coordination Centre's mission

The National Missing Persons Coordination Centre (NMPCC) aims to coordinate and promote a nationally-integrated approach to reducing the incidence and impact of missing persons.

The NMPCC provides the direction, coordination and facilitation of missing person issues. The centre works in partnership with state and territory police jurisdictions, other relevant Commonwealth and state government agencies, non-government search agencies, families and friends of missing persons, as well as the broader community. A coordinated approach provides clearly articulated roles and responsibilities which prevents duplication of effort and leads to more informed decision-making, enhanced referral mechanisms and maximum use of agency resources.

The NMPCC website address is www.afp.gov.au/missing.

Other agencies

State and territory police jurisdictions search for people reported as missing

when there is a concern for their health and wellbeing.

Non-government agencies also provide search services with their own specific criteria for pursuing a search on behalf of a family member or friend. The non-government agencies are the Australian Red Cross, the Salvation Army, International Social Service and Link-up Aboriginal Corp.

The Families & Friends of Missing Persons Unit (FFMPU) is the only unit in Australia that works with, and on behalf of, families and friends of missing persons. The FFMPU's mission is to coordinate the delivery of support services which include direct counselling and support as well as indirect support through the facilitation of administrative or legislative reform, and the production of relevant key publications.

The FFMPU website address is www.lawlink.nsw.gov.au/missing.

For further information on the research or the NMPCC, please contact Leonie Jacques, Coordinator, NMPCC on 02 6246 2137 or via email to leonie.jacques@afp.gov.au.

