Every Five Minutes

A Review of the Available Data on Missing Children in the UK

PACT™

PARENTS & ABDUCTED CHILDREN TOGETHER

AN ASSOCIATE OF ICMEC

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A report by
PACT's Research Team

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About PACT

PACT (Parents & Abducted Children Together) is an international, non-profit organisation registered both in the UK and the US. It was founded in 2000 by Lady Meyer, wife of the then British Ambassador to the United States. Its patrons are Cherie Blair, wife of the British Prime Minister and Laura Bush, the First Lady of the United States.

PACT's initial mission was to fight parental child abduction across frontiers by raising awareness of this growing, but little-known, problem and by advocating solutions. Parental child abduction remains at the forefront of PACT's concerns. But it has broadened its mission to include the location and retrieval of all missing children.

PACT's vision is truly international. Much of its work is based on techniques successfully deployed in the US to help bring missing children safely home.

PACT's main focus is advocacy, policy and research. In the UK, PACT works closely with the police, the government, the media, and other non-profit organisations to meet this challenge.

One of the ways PACT helps the police trace missing and abducted children is by promoting the Child Rescue Alert system (see page 91) and the UK Missingkids Website (see page 89) and by funding the production and distribution of posters of missing children.

www.pact-online.org

Executive Summary

It is currently impossible to obtain an accurate and comprehensive picture of the scale and nature of the problem of missing children in the UK. This is for two reasons: there is no national policy for tackling the problem; and, as a result, there are no reliable and uniform national statistics.

Such statistics as do exist are plagued with difficulties. They are collected from widely disparate sources, with different methods of collection over different timescales and using different definitions of what constitutes 'missing' and a 'child'. The difficulties are compounded by the complexity of the problem. However the figures are added up, it is clear that children go 'missing' for a multiplicity of reasons.

The situation in the UK is in sharp contrast to that in the US, where policy and practice are highly developed. For more than a generation the Federal Government and Congress have enacted a series of laws to protect children and ensure the retrieval of those who go missing for whatever reason. They have led to the creation of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), which serves both as a clearinghouse and as a source of support and assistance to those trying to find and recover missing children. The US authorities have also commissioned periodic, in-depth studies of the phenomenon of missing children through NISMART (National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children). These studies generate, on the basis of clear definitions, detailed statistics on the different types of 'missing episodes'. They are paid for by the US Department of Justice.

Because the scale and nature of the problem in the US are well understood, it has facilitated the development of effective policies to protect children. It has also made cooperation far easier between law enforcement bodies, child welfare agencies, and the non-governmental sector.

PACT's report shows that most of this is absent in the UK. We have analysed a multiplicity of available sources of information to try to establish some basic data: how many children go missing each year in the UK; into which category they fall; and what happens to them while they are away. We were unable to obtain clear answers to any of these questions. Indeed, the complexity of

PACT's report bears eloquent testimony to the confusion, fragmentation and ambiguity at the heart of UK statistics.

This means that the raw material for effective responses to the problem of missing and abducted children in the UK is at best incomplete, at worst virtually non-existent. Until this situation is remedied, our children will not get the protection that they deserve.

There is therefore an urgent need to make improvements in the recording and collection of information. The first requirement is a nationally agreed definition of the different categories of 'missing' and a uniform way of reporting for all police forces, NGOs, and relevant agencies. This will enable the creation of a comprehensive national database providing sufficient breakdown and detail in future statistics.

PACT believes that it is the responsibility of the Home Office to set in train the necessary improvements. This means, as in America, laying down clear definitions and guidelines, on the basis of which accurate, uniform, and detailed statistics can be collected from police forces, NGOs and relevant agencies across the UK. There will be financial implications for the training and support which will be necessary to make this work. It is open to debate whether the new system should be run from inside the Home Office or through a separate agency responsible to the Home Secretary.

Without reliable statistics, we cannot establish the extent and the nature of the problem. This makes it impossible to plan effective programmes and preventative policies. Conversely, a thorough knowledge of the problem would bring about a better understanding of the risk posed to missing children; an improvement in the response from the police and other agencies; and more effective support to parents and families.

Before all else what is now required is a change in attitude on the part of government, police, and society as a whole, so that much higher priority is given to children who go missing.

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Contents

List of Tables and Figures

List of Tables

List of Figures

Introduction

Every five minutes a child goes missing in the United Kingdom*. The events that surround these disappearances are both numerous and diverse. Some children quarrel with their parents and run away from home, perhaps staying elsewhere overnight. Some may be thrown out of their home by their parents. Others go missing in response to longer-term problems such as emotional, physical, or sexual abuse. Others still are abducted – by a parent, or a relative, or even a stranger.

The definition offered by the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO, 2002) is understandably broad and inclusive:

> '*anyone whose whereabouts is unknown whatever the circumstances of disappearance. [These individuals] will be considered missing until located and their well-being or otherwise [is] established.*'

Complex social issues surround the phenomenon of children who go missing. They demand a multi-faceted response: effective and coordinated government policy, appropriate police responses, and – where possible – preventative action by social workers, teachers, youth workers and other well placed professionals. There also needs to be specialist services to try to locate and return missing children and to give practical support to left-behind family members and friends.

But the foundation of an effective response is to understand the nature and extent of the problem. How many children actually go missing in the UK? How many cases are runaways, thrownaways, misunderstandings, abductions, etc? What are the characteristics of these children? And what happens to them while they are away?

These are just some of the questions for which reliable answers are needed so as to tailor responses that are effective in preventing, and in responding to, the problem of missing children. The overall purpose of this study is to review and assess the extent to which these answers are available to policymakers and practitioners in the UK.

* *A conservative estimate of 100,000 reports of missing children each year in the UK (see Chapter 3) equates to a rate of approximately one report every five minutes.*

Aims of this report

This report aims to:

- Establish a useful typology of missing children episodes into which the overall missing children population can be divided.
- Summarise briefly what we know about the nature and extent of missing children (differentiating between types of missing episode where possible) in the UK.
- Examine the methods that have been used to produce this knowledge base, highlighting shortcomings and their potential impact.
- Where possible, make suggestions on how to improve our understanding of the problem of missing children.

To fulfill these aims, we undertook a thorough review of the literature available in the UK. We also examined some of the literature from other countries and, in places, compared how information has been produced and to what effect.

Relevant experts and practitioners have been consulted, where necessary, to clarify some of the finer details of how different data sources are produced and how they contribute to our knowledge.

The report seeks to present a picture of missing children across the whole of the UK. In practice, many studies or statistical series are based on smaller geographical areas, for example, England and Wales; Scotland; or just England. Where this is the case, the geographical coverage of the data has been stated.

Structure of the report

This paper summarises the results of our study and presents our observations and recommendations. It has been divided into the following sections:

- Chapter 1 looks at the problem of defining a missing child and describes how information on different types of missing children is collected in the United Kingdom.
- Chapter 2 summarises developments in the United States, including definitions and methods of collecting data.
- Chapter 3 presents and assesses what we know about the overall population of children reported missing to the police in the United Kingdom.
- Chapter 4 analyses what we know about runaways and thrownaways in the United Kingdom.
- Chapter 5 examines what we know about child abductions in the United Kingdom.

Chapter 1
Definitions and Approaches

Of course, behind every attention-grabbing headline such as *'Every 5 Minutes'* there sits the often confusing and sometimes misleading world of statistics. To make sense of the headline or findings, it is important to know how the phenomenon in question has first been defined; what has been included and excluded in its measurement; the strengths and weaknesses of the methods that have been used to make estimations; and whether the correct interpretation of these findings has been presented.

These considerations are all relevant to understanding the nature and the extent of the problem of missing children in the UK. Indeed, the very title of this report – *'Every 5 Minutes'* – could be the subject of debate about the definitions used, the reporting and recording of missing persons, and the method of producing statistics for the whole of the UK based on figures for only part of the country.

The following chapters offer a critical appraisal of how information has so far been produced on missing children in the UK and how different data sources contribute to our understanding of the problem. Before doing so, this chapter offers some observations on the difficulties of defining the missing children population and on the general approaches that have been taken in the UK to measure and understand the phenomenon.

Definitional problems

The concept of a missing child may seem simple: to be missing, you must be missing to someone who does not know your whereabouts. In reality, the problem is far more complex. Children go missing for a variety of reasons. A child can have run away, been abducted, or have simply been delayed by a mishap on his/her way home.

The circumstances surrounding a child's disappearance and the distinction between various types of missing episodes may not always be clear. Whether or not a child is reported as missing can, for example, depend on the state of mind of the child's caretaker, rather than the child's actual circumstances. Furthermore, a child reported missing may not actually be missing in the real sense of the term.

For example, a left-behind parent may know the location of his/her parentally abducted child, but not be able to get the child back. The parent would, in such circumstances, consider his/her child to be missing; but the child would not necessarily be classified as missing, for example, by the police. Similarly, a stranger may abduct a child on its way home from school, take it to an isolated place, rape him/her and release the child, all before his/her parents realise that anything is wrong. That child would not be reported as missing.

A child who runs away but returns home without the carer ever noticing that he/she had gone would also not be reported as missing. And while these 'runaway' children would consider themselves to be missing, their carers would not. Conversely, some children who are missing do not necessarily think of themselves as missing, even though their carers do; for example, children who play truant or neglect to tell their carers that they plan to go to a friend's house after school.

It is also arguable at what point a child who is late arriving home will be considered missing, rather than just late. This distinction may seem unimportant, but it can make a difference to the number of reports filed with the police. For example, residential care home staff tend to file a missing report sooner than a parent to avoid any legal liability. As a result, the number of children reported as missing from care may be inflated compared to those reported as missing from home.

Types of missing children

Problems with defining missing children arise in part because 'missing' is an umbrella term for numerous different groups of children whose whereabouts are (mainly) unknown at a given point in time. Within this overall 'population' of missing children are specific types of cases, presenting different social problems, and affecting different children. They have different causes, different dynamics, different remedies and concern different types of institutions and professionals.

Then, as mentioned earlier, not all children will be considered as missing. For example, in cases of family abductions where the whereabouts of the child is known to the caretaker, or in cases of runaways where the caretaker knows the child to be at the home of friends or relatives. Even in cases of non-family abductions, episodes may be so short-lived that the child may not have been missed by anyone.

When examining the methods used to estimate the number of children who go missing, it is important to recognise which types of missing children are being included within the researcher's definition. Furthermore, different data sources on missing children will systematically include or exclude certain types of missing children. This, of course, needs to be taken into consideration.

Conceptually, it is useful to distinguish between the whole population of missing children and the specific types of missing episodes which actually describe the nature or cause of what has happened. The remainder of this study offers observations on how, in the UK, estimates have been made for both the whole population and individual types of missing episodes, and how satisfactory these estimates are.

Approaches to measuring the number of missing children

In the UK, regardless of the problems of definition described above, there are no official, nationally gathered statistics on the number of children who go missing.

However, a substantial amount of discrete research has been conducted, providing important information on different types (and in some cases on the whole population) of missing children. Over the last 30 years, around 50 studies have collected data from various sources using various methods. These studies are listed in the bibliography.

Most studies in the UK have been based on either contacts with missing children themselves or on the examination of missing persons' reports made to the police. More detail on each approach will follow in the next chapters. However some limitations are immediately apparent:

– First, studies based on direct contact with missing children – either through representative surveys of school children or through studies analysing data from helplines or refuge centres – have tended to focus on runaway or thrownaway incidents. Whilst there is now an impressive body of such research offering a good deal of high-grade information on these types of missing children, these studies do not describe the nature and extent of the whole missing children population. Notable omissions include most abductions and probably many of those epidodes involving a misunderstanding.

– Second, studies based on reports of missing children made to the police also do not capture the full population of missing children. Certain types of missing children episodes are likely to be undercounted. For example, cases where a child has been thrown out of the home, given that it is the parent (who would normally report the child as missing) who has been instrumental in causing the disappearance. Equally, whilst many disappearances of only a very short duration may actually be reported to the police, many will not be offically recorded because the missing child will have returned before recording took place.

– Third, in the UK there has been no attempt systematically to collate data from all possible sources to provide a comprehensive account of the whole missing children population with each of the component types. It is almost impossible to bring the findings of different studies together to achieve this because of different, and in many cases, over-lapping definitions of missing children types, different time periods, and different geographical representation in the studies. This presents a serious limitation to our understanding of the missing children phenomenon in the UK.

Chapter 2
Developments in the United States

The situation in the United States is in sharp contrast to that in the UK.

In the US considerable effort has been made to clarify definitions and collect data. A substantial amount of academic research was carried out between the 1930s and the 1970s. Then in 1975 a National Statistical Survey on Runaway Youth was conducted.

In 1984, Congress mandated the Department of Justice (through *The Missing Children's Assistance Act*) to conduct periodic studies to determine, for a given year, the actual number of children reported missing.

These studies, called the *National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children (NISMART)*, were undertaken by university-based researchers. They provided the first comprehensive, national data on the incidence of missing children. They established clearly that the problem of missing, runaway, and abducted children is complex and multifaceted.

One of the studies' main conclusions was that a variety of different child welfare and judicial problems had been lumped together (Finkelhor *et al*, 1990). For example, the reports established that runaway children and family abducted children were of different ages, faced different risks, and were dealt with by different social agencies. It also argued that many missing children were not truly 'missing' in the sense that either the caretakers/parents knew their whereabouts but were unable to get them back (family abductions), or that they were not looking for them (thrownaways).

The reports also concluded that family abduction was a substantially larger problem than originally thought; that many children who were previously termed as 'runaways' were in fact 'thrownaways'; that there was a large group of children who had been overlooked (for example, children who were lost, injured, or otherwise missing); and that a relatively large number of the missing children population were not reported to the police.

NISMART 1

The first study – NISMART 1 – provided estimates for 1988 and was released in 1990 (Finkelhor, Hotaling, and Sedlak).

It included seven distinct sets of data collection:

- A large telephone survey of households (parents or guardians in 10,544 households concerning 20,505 children),
- A study of community care professionals (735 agencies),
- A survey of youth residential facilities,
- A study of returned runaways,
- A study of police records,
- A re-analysis of 12 years of Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) data on child homicides, and
- A re-analysis of data from the Study of the National Incidence and Prevalence of Child Abuse and Neglect, conducted by Westat in 1986.

NISMART 1 divided missing children's incidents into five broad categories:

- Runaway
- Thrownaway
- Non-family abduction
- Family abduction
- Lost or otherwise missing

These were further broken down into sub-sections. For example, the 'Runaway' category was subdivided into runaways from households and runaways from juvenile facilities; incidents reported to the police and incidents not reported.

After NISMART 1 was completed, the Department of Justice began to plan for NISMART 2 by reviewing and revising the research methods, definitions, and concepts used in NISMART 1. This led to an improved understanding of the different aspects of missing incidents as well as a more comprehensive picture of the number of children missing in the USA.

NISMART 2

NISMART 2 provided estimates for 1999 and was published in 2002 (Hammer, Finkelhor and Sedlak, 2002b).

It was based on a national household telephone survey of adults (parents or guardians in 16,111 households concerning 31,787 children); a national household survey of youth (5,015 young people between the ages of 10 and 18); a juvenile facilities' study (telephone interviews with staff in 74 facilities); a survey of police records (400 county sheriff departments and 3,765 municipal law enforcement agencies); and a re-analysis of data from a more current study of the National Incidence and Prevalence of Child Abuse and Neglect.

As a result of the extended approach and methodology, the researchers revised the categories used in NISMART 1, as follows:

- Non-family Abduction
- Family Abduction
- Runaway/Thrownaway
- Missing Involuntary, Lost or Injured
- Missing Benign Explanation

Whilst adding new categories, the researchers combined runaways/thrown-aways as further analysis suggested that the distinction between runaways and thrown-aways was not as clear-cut as previously thought. Researchers found that many young people had experienced both kinds of episodes, and many individual episodes had both runaway and thrownaway elements. Furthermore, the categorisation of an episode often depended on whether information was gathered from the young people (who tended to emphasise the thrownaway aspects of the episode) or from the caretakers (who emphasised the runaway aspect).

An overview of the NISMART 2 results is presented in Sedlak *et al* (2002) and further details on various aspects of the study can be found in Finkelhor *et al* (2002) and Hammer *et al* (2002a and 2002b).

NISMART's Definitions

One of the most important contributions of the NISMART reports was to provide clear, multi-layered definitions to establish the scope of the problem of missing children. Without clear definitions, data cannot be compared, analysed, and evaluated.

The definition of NISMART 2 broad categories is as follows:

- **Non-family Abduction**

  Children who are taken or unlawfully detained by someone who is not a parent, relative, or legal guardian for at least one hour in an isolated place by the use (or threat) of force without lawful authority or parental permission. Or children younger than 15 years old (or mentally incompetent) who are taken or detained by (or voluntarily accompany) a non-family perpetrator who conceals their whereabouts, demands ransom, or expresses the intention to keep them permanently.

- **Family Abduction**

  Children who are taken or retained by a parent or relative, or someone acting on the family's behalf, in breach of custody rights and concealed or transported out of the State with the intent to deprive the caretaker of contact or reverse custody arrangements indefinitely. (For children of 15 or older, unless mentally incompetent, there must be evidence that the perpetrator used physical force or threat of bodily harm when taking or detaining the child).

- **Runaways/Thrownaways**

  Runaways: Children who leave home voluntarily without the knowledge or the permission of their parents or guardians and who stay away at least overnight (if 14 or younger) or stay away for at least two nights (if 15 or older).

  Thrownaways: Children who do not leave home voluntarily, but instead are abandoned; or told to leave their homes by a parent or guardian, and are not allowed to return; or who come and go totally unsupervised.

  In theory, runaways can be distinguished from thrownaways; but in practice it is very difficult to distinguish between them because many episodes of both categories result from some sort of family conflict.

- **Missing Involuntary, Lost, or Injured**

  Children who are lost and involuntarily missing and fail to return home or make contact with a parent, guardian, or other caretaker. Their caretaker becomes alarmed and makes some attempt to locate the children. These children actively try to return home or make contact with the caretaker, but they are lost, stranded, or injured or too young

to know how to return home or make contact.

- **Missing Benign Explanation or Otherwise Missing**
  Children who fail to return home or make contact with a parent, guardian, or other caretaker. Their caretaker becomes alarmed, tries to locate them, and contacts the police. Children in this situation have not been lost, injured, abducted, victimised, or classified as runaway/thrownaway.

Thanks to these extensive studies, it is now possible to estimate quite accurately how many children go missing every year in the US.

Estimates of the size of the missing children population in the United States

NISMART 2 estimated that the total number of children who were missing from their caretakers§ in 1999 (including children who were reported missing and those who were not) was 1,315,600. This is equivalent to an annual rate of 18.8 children per 1,000 in the general population of children in the United States.

The number of missing children who were reported missing in 1999 (i.e. reported to the police or to missing childrens' agencies in order to locate them) was estimated to be 797,500 (or 61% of all caretaker missing children (see Table 1) which is equivalent to a rate of 11.4 children per 1,000.

NISMART also established the reasons why children go missing (see Table 2); their ages (see Table 3); their gender (see Table 4); and their ethnicity (see Table 5).

Table 1 Unified estimates of caretaker missing children and reported missing children in the USA

Source: *National Estimates of Missing Children: An Overview,* Sedlak, Finkelhor, Hammer and Schiltuz, NISMART, 2002

Category	Estimated Total (95% Confidence Interval)*	Rate per 1,000 in U.S. Child Population (95% Confidence Interval)*
Caretaker missing children† (reported and not reported)	**1,315,600** (1,131,100–1,500,100)	18.8 (16.1–21.4)
Reported missing children‡	**797,500** (645,400–949,500)	11.4 (9.2–13.5)

Note: All estimates are rounded to the nearest 100.

* The 95-percent confidence interval indicates that if the study were repeated 100 times, 95 of the replications would produce estimates within the ranges noted.

† Child's whereabouts were unknown, caretaker was alarmed and tried to locate the child.

‡ Reported to police or a missing children's agency for purposes of locating the child. The diagram illustrates the proportional relationship between the total number of caretaker missing children and the subset of children who were reported missing.

The diagram illustrates the proportional relationship between the total number of caretaker missing children and the subset of children who were reported missing.

§ *'Caretaker missing', is defined as the parent/caretaker notices that the child is gone, does not know the child's whereabouts, becomes alarmed for at least one hour, and tries to find the child. This category does not include children whose whereabouts are known as, for example, in cases of family abduction where the caretaker knows where the child is but is unable to retrieve him/her.*

Table 2 Reasons children became missing in the USA

Source: *National Estimates of Missing Children: An Overview,* Sedlak, Finkelhor, Hammer and Schiltuz, NISMART, 2002

Episode Type		Estimated Total[1]	95% confidence interval[2]	%[1]	Rate per 1,000 children in the US population (Total No. children = 70,172,700)
Caretaker missing children (Total = 1,315,600)	Non-family abduction[3]	**33,000***	(2,000–64,000)	3*	0.47*
	Family abduction	**117,200**	(79,000–155,400)	9	1.67
	Runaway/Thrownaway	**628,900**	(481,000–776,900)	48	8.96
	Missing involuntary, lost or injured	**198,300**	(124,800–271,800)	15	2.83
	Missing, benign explanation	**374,700**	(289,900–459,500)	28	5.34
Reported missing children (Total = 797,500)	Non-family abduction[3]	**12,100***	(<100–31,000)	2*	0.17*
	Family abduction	**56,500**	(22,600–90,400)	7	0.81
	Runaway/Thrownaway	**357,600**	(238,000–477,200)	45	5.10
	Missing involuntary, lost or injured	**61,900**	(19,700–104,100)	8	0.88
	Missing, benign explanation	**340,500**	(256,000–425,000)	43	4.85

Notes: All estimates are rounded to the nearest 100.

1 Estimates sum to more than the total of 1,315,600, and percents sum to more than 100, because children who had multiple episodes are included in every row that applies to them.

2 Indicates that if the study were repeated 100 times, 95% of the replications would produce estimates within the ranges noted.

3 Includes stereotypical kidnapping.

* Estimate is based on an extremely small sample of cases; therefore, its precision and confidence interval are unreliable.

Table 3 Ages of missing children in the USA

Source: *National Estimates of Missing Children: An Overview,* Sedlak, Finkelhor, Hammer and Schiltuz, NISMART, 2002

	Age	Estimated Total	95% Confidence Interval[1]	Percent	95% Confidence Interval[1]	Percent of U.S Child Population (N = 70,172,700)
Caretaker missing children	0–5	**138,200**	(89,600–186,700)	11	(7–14)	33
	6–11	**175,300**	(117,100–233,600)	13	(9–17)	34
	12–14	**402,400**	(292,400–512,500)	31	(23–38)	17
	15–17	**596,900**	(476,700–717,100)	45	(38–53)	17
	Total	**1,315,600**	(1,131,100–1,500,100)	100		100
Reported missing children	0–5	**96,500**	(48,400–144,700)	12	(7–17)	33
	6–11	**113,400**	(61,500–165,300)	14	(8–20)	34
	12–14	**235,500**	(161,300–309,700)	30	(19–40)	17
	15–17	**349,300**	(253,600–444,900)	44	(35–53)	17
	Total	**797,500**	(645,400–949,500)	100		100

Note: All estimates are rounded to the nearest 100. Percents may not sum to 100 because of rounding.

[1] The 95-percent confidence interval indicates that if the study were repeated 100 times, 95 of the replications would produce estimates within the ranges noted.

Table 4 Gender of missing children in the USA
Source: *National Estimates of Missing Children: An Overview,* Sedlak, Finkelhor, Hammer and Schiltuz, NISMART, 2002

	Gender	Estimated Total	95% Confidence Interval[1]	Percent	95% Confidence Interval[1]	Percent of U.S Child Population (N = 70,172,700)
Caretaker missing children	Male	**754,500**	(604,200–904,800)	57	(51–64)	51
	Female	**561,100**	(459,000–663,200)	43	(36–49)	49
	Total	**1,315,600**	(1,131,100–1,500,100)	100		100
Reported missing children	Male	**409,400**	(290,400–528,400)	51	(42–61)	51
	Female	**388,000**	(296,900–479,200)	49	(39–58)	49
	Total	**797,500**	(645,400–949,500)	100		100

Note: All estimates are rounded to the nearest 100. Percents may not sum to 100 because of rounding.
[1] The 95-percent confidence interval indicates that if the study were repeated 100 times, 95 of the replications would produce estimates within the ranges noted.

Table 5 Race/Ethnicity of missing children in the USA
Source: *National Estimates of Missing Children: An Overview,* Sedlak, Finkelhor, Hammer and Schiltuz, NISMART, 2002

	Race/ Ethnicity	Estimated Total	95% Confidence Interval[1]	Percent	95% Confidence Interval[1]	Percent of U.S Child Population (N = 70,172,700)
Caretaker missing children	White, non-Hispanic	**752,300**	(624,800–879,700)	57	(51–63)	65
	Black, non-Hispanic	**215,000**	(140,100–289,900)	16	(11–22)	15
	Hispanic	**234,500**	(149,100–319,800)	18	(12–24)	16
	Other	**107,200**	(50,400–164,000)	8	(4–12)	5
	No information	**6,700***	(<100–15,000)	1*	(<1–1)	—
	Total	**1,315,600**	(1,131,100–1,500,100)	100		100
Reported missing children	White, non-Hispanic	**428,800**	(331,500–526,100)	54	(46–62)	65
	Black, non-Hispanic	**149,700**	(90,100–209,400)	19	(12–26)	15
	Hispanic	**163,900**	(88,900–238,900)	21	(13–29)	16
	Other	**52,100**	(19,000–85,200)	7	(3–10)	5
	No information	**3,000***	(<100–6,900)	<1*	(<1–1)	—
	Total	**797,500**	(645,400–949,500)	100		100

Note: All estimates are rounded to the nearest 100. Percents may not sum to 100 because of rounding.
[1] The 95-percent confidence interval indicates that, if the study were repeated 100 times, 95 of the replications would produce estimates within the ranges noted.
* Estimate is based on too few sample cases to be reliable.

Additional NISMART data provided information on the characteristics of the missing child (by each type); the circumstances surrounding the incident and its duration; the outcome of going missing both in terms of what happened to the child and the dangers faced by the child while away; and the risk of a child going missing. Together, the various component parts of the NISMART studies offered an invaluable resource to policy makers and practitioners concerned with the problem of missing children.

NISMART 1 and 2 enabled parents, the public, the police, and policy makers better to understand the dimensions of the problem and identify the factors which put children at risk of becoming missing. This led to a series of important steps taken by the US government to help find missing children and to develop policies to address the broader problem.

For example, the *National Child Search Assistance Act, 1990* (Public Law No: 101-647) mandated each federal, state, and local law enforcement agency to take a report on a missing child and enter descriptive information on that child in the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) database, without a waiting period, regardless of whether the abduction constituted a criminal violation or not. It further required them to maintain close liaison with the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC).

NCMEC itself was created in 1984. That year Congress passed the *Missing Childrens' Assistance Act,* which mandated the creation of a national centre and clearing house on missing children.

Today, NCMEC receives over $30 million of federal funding from the Department of Justice.

Locating missing and abducted children is one of NCMEC's key roles. In carrying out this role, NCMEC coordinates with law enforcement agencies at local, state, federal, and international levels. It has direct access to the NCIC missing children's database.

Working with the FBI and government departments, NCMEC provides technical assistance to individuals and the police in the prevention, investigation, prosecution, and treatment of cases involving missing and exploited children. It also assists the US Department of State in certain cases of international parental child abduction; offers training programmes; and distributes photographs and descriptions of missing children worldwide.

Photographs of missing children, first seen on milk cartons, are today exhibited on the walls of nearly every federal building and most WalMart stores. Direct-mail advertising cards are delivered to over 80 million mail boxes throughout the nation. In 1999, in an arrangement with the Internal Revenue Services (IRS), the photos began appearing in tax booklets as well.

In October 2002, NCMEC organised the first White House Conference on Missing, Exploited, and Runaway Children to raise public awareness and to discuss practical steps on how to improve the safety of children in America. President and Mrs Bush, Secretary of State Colin Powell, and Attorney General John Ashcroft gave key note speeches.

The President announced a series of steps that he and his administration were taking to tackle the problem of missing and exploited children, including a $10 million provision to expand the Amber Alert system (see page 91); a 26% increase in funding for the NCMEC; and the release of a guide designed to help parents take specific steps to improve the safety of their children.

A joint effort on this scale between government, policy makers, the police and NGOs is unknown in Europe. A principal reason is that we are still unaware of the full extent of the problem of missing children.

Conclusions

In the US, the problem of missing children received the attention of the Federal Government and Congress as long ago as 1974 with the *Runaway Youth Act*. Since then, continuing efforts have been made further to combat the problem.

The Parental Kidnapping Prevention Act, 1980, extended resources to local authorities to locate and apprehend abducting parents. *The Missing Children Act, 1982*, authorised the FBI to enter and maintain information about missing children in the National Crime Information Center (NCIC). *The Missing Children's Assistance Act, 1984,* directed all federally funded missing children programmes to coordinate their efforts and established a national resource centre and clearing house to provide assistance to those seeking to locate and recover missing children – the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) – including a national toll-free telephone line for missing children. Following the *National Child Search Assistance Act* of 1990, *The Runaway, Homeless, and Missing Children Protection Act, 2003,* sought to ensure the protection of runaway and homeless youth, keeping them off the streets and away from dangerous circumstances, by providing both emergency shelter programmes and long-term support. This included a national 24-hour hotline, training and

technical assistance and community-based programmes to provide basic needs, including shelter, food, clothes, health care, and counselling.

In the UK, despite consistent urging there has been no coordinated policy to tackle the problem of missing children and no nationally gathered statistics.

The UK has much to learn from the American example.

President George W. Bush addressing participants at the first-ever White House Conference on Missing, Exploited, and Runaway Children which was held on 2nd October 2002 at the Ronald Reagan Building and International Conference Center in Washington, D.C. The event helped raise public awareness of steps that parents, law enforcement, and communities can take to make America's children safer.

Photograph: Paul Morse. Source: www.whitehouse.gov

Chapter 3

Children Reported Missing to the Police

One of the main sources of data used to analyse the problem of missing children in the UK has been reports made to the police. Some of the key studies published so far are listed below.

Key studies

- Abrahams and Mungall (1992) *Runaways: Exploding the Myths.* London: National Children's Home
- Hedges (2002) *Missing You Already: A guide to the investigation of missing persons.* London: Home Office
- Newiss (1999) *Missing, Presumed…? The police response to missing persons.* Police Research Series Paper 114. London: Home Office
- Newiss (2004) *Estimating the Risk Faced by Missing Persons: A Study of Homicide Victims as an Example of an Outcome-Based Approach.* International Journal of Police Science & Management, 6(1)
- Newman (1989) *Young Runaways.* London: The Children's Society
- Social Exclusion Unit (2002) *Young Runaways.* London: Office of the Deputy Prime Minister
- Tarling and Burrows (2004) *The Nature and Outcome of Going Missing.* International Journal of Police Science and Management 6(1)

Data coverage and limitations

In theory, reports of missing children made to the police can include all types of cases from runaways and thrownaways, through to missing involuntary, lost or injured, missing benign explanation, and abductions. So far, in the UK, only studies based on police data sources have offered this breadth of coverage of different types of missing childrens' cases.

However, studies of missing children based on reports made to the police are dependent on the two-stage process of reporting and recording. This process introduces an inevitable bias in the types of cases represented.

The police can only record cases if they are actually reported to them. Whilst it is very difficult to know the extent of under-reporting in different case types, it must be plausible, indeed probable, that a proportion of thrownaway incidents are not brought to the attention of the police given the parents' role in the disappearance. Other incidents, from all types of missing children's episodes, may also not be reported to the police. For example, they may not last long enough or be considered serious enough; or the families involved, regardless of the type of disappearance, may be unwilling to contact the police; for example, those with a criminal background.

Even some cases which are reported to the police may not actually be recorded, particularly if they are resolved soon after being reported. The exclusion of the so-called 'cancelled before circulation' cases (circulated to officers either in the same or other police force areas) occurs because there is usually no operationally beneficial reason for what is effectively retrospective recording after the incident has been resolved. Whilst it is understandable that recording already resolved cases could be seen as a waste of police time and resources, such a practice would present researchers with much more complete data of all missing children.

Unlike reports of crimes, there is no requirement (for example from the Home Office) for police forces to record the number of reports of missing children received throughout the year. Whilst most forces have computerised systems for collecting details of crimes and returning the required information to the Home Office at regular intervals, the recording of incidents of missing children is very *ad hoc*.

Some police forces have introduced bespoke software for the recording of missing persons' incidents which provides detailed information on individual cases. Other forces do not appear to have any electronic capacity to collect information on missing children, and a simple count of the number of reports received can be difficult to obtain. Whist recognising the need to keep the administrative burden on the police to a minimum, this is a state of

affairs which we believe needs to change. At the very least, police forces should be able to provide an annual count of the number of children reported missing in their area.

There are other difficulties with the type of information that is available from police sources in the UK. Estimates of the size of the missing children population are more often than not based on the number of *incidents* of children reported as missing rather than on the number of *individual* missing children. This is an important distinction. A count of incidents will include any number of disappearances resulting from an individual child repeatedly going missing. We will see below that such episodes can account for a sizeable proportion of the total number of reported disappearances. Studies describing the characteristics of missing children based on incidents reported to the police will therefore inevitably over-represent the characteristics of repeat runaways (unless – unusually – the data have been manipulated in some way to provide incidents relating to individual children).

Furthermore, studies based on reports of missing children made to the police rarely differentiate between the types of missing episodes outlined in the previous chapter. Most cases are treated within the framework of a single population of missing children, with the only common definition that they have simply been reported to, and recorded by, the police as such.

Reports of missing children made to the police would be a very valuable resource in understanding the nature of the missing children phenomenon in the UK. But it would require additional details and the systematic recording of cases by all police forces.

The ACPO *Guidance on the Management, Recording and Investigation of Missing Persons*, published in March 2005 encourages all police forces to use IT systems which comply with data standards set by PITO (Police Information Technology Organisation) to record cases of missing persons. A list of data variables is now available in the form of the National (missing persons) Reporting Form, recently published by the Association of Chief Police Officers and the National Centre for Policing Excellence.

A widespread implementation of the Guidance's recommendations, preferably including a shared list of data variables (i.e. the same pieces of information collected on all cases) and common definitions, would provide a national pool of data that could be routinely analysed to produce a basic description of the key characteristics of the missing children population.

Estimates of the size of the missing children population in the United Kingdom – based on police reports

The first research to provide an estimate of the number of children who go missing annually in the UK was undertaken by Newman for The Children's Society (published in 1989). Using data from 38 police forces, Newman estimated that there were 97,715 incidents of under 18 year-olds going missing in 1986 for the whole of the UK. Conducting similar research in the early 1990s, although based on data from just five police forces, Abrahams and Mungall (1992) arrived at a very similar estimate of just over 102,000 incidents of under 18 year-olds reported runaways* in 1990 in England and Scotland.

More recent estimates were obtained for the Government's Social Exclusion Unit review of *Young Runaways* (Social Exclusion Unit, 2002). In the course of the review, 28 police forces were surveyed. This revealed that they received an average of 35 missing persons' reports relating to under 16 year-olds every week. As there are 51 police forces in the UK outside London, a crude aggregation, regardless of the size of the police force, would suggest that provincial police forces filed a total of 92,820 reports of missing under 16 year-olds annually.

Statistics for the period 2000 – 2004 made available by the Metropolitan Police Service show that it received an average of just over 15,000 reports of missing under18 year-olds each year.

So, an estimated total based on reports of under 18 year-olds from the Metropolitan Police Service (15,000) as well as on reports of under 16 year-olds from provincial forces (92,820) would be in the region of 105,000 to 110,000 incidents per year. Clearly, this figure would be even greater if the Social Exclusion Unit estimate included reports of 16 and 17 year-olds made to provincial forces.

Whether these more recent estimates are evidence of an increase in the number of reports of missing children made to the police is not clear, given the infrequent nature of the studies and the vagaries of the different police reporting and recording systems used.

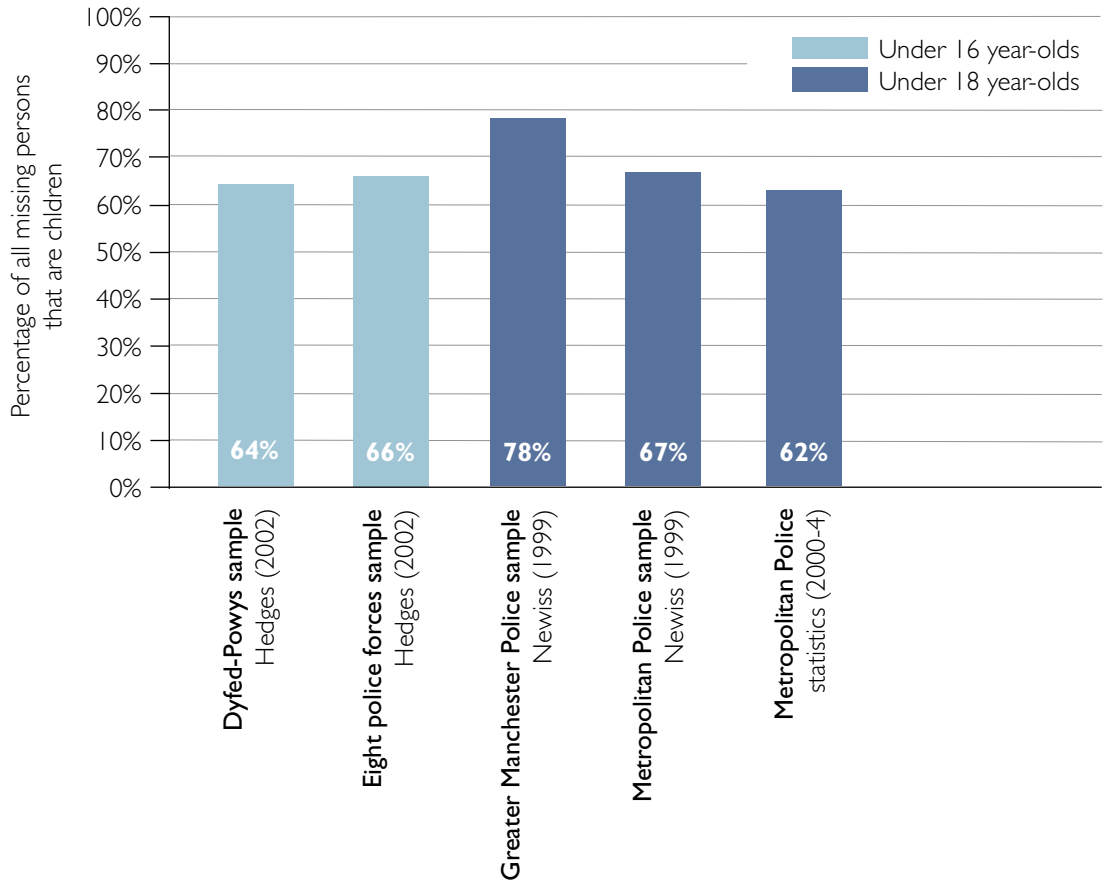
An alternative evaluation of the number of young people who are reported missing to the police each year can be obtained by estimating how many of the total of *all* persons reported missing are young

* *In their study, Abrahams and Mungall use the definition for a runaway as 'a young person aged 18 or under who has left home or local authority care without agreement and has stayed away for a 'significant period of time', the length of time depending on the age of the runaway'. Thrownaways are not included, but since thrownaways are not likely to be reported to the police, we will use the generic term 'missing' when referring to Abraham & Mungall's report for the purpose of this chapter.*

people. The Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO, 2002) estimated that over 150,000 people in the UK are reported missing to the police each year. Studies that have examined samples of police missing persons' reports find that the majority of these reports relate to young people. For example:

- Hedges (2002) reported that 64% of a sample from Dyfed-Powys Constabulary (based on 1,680 cases) and 66% of a sample drawn from eight police forces (based on 255 cases) were aged 16 or under.
- Newiss (1999) reported that 78% of a sample from Greater Manchester Police and 67% of a sample from the Metropolitan Police Service were aged 18 or under. The same author found very similar results from the same forces reported in a later study in 2004.
- Statistics provided by the Metropolitan Police Service (2000 – 2004) indicate that, on average, 62% of reports of all missing persons relate to individuals under the age of 18.

Fig. 1 Percentage of missing persons reported to the police that relate to young people

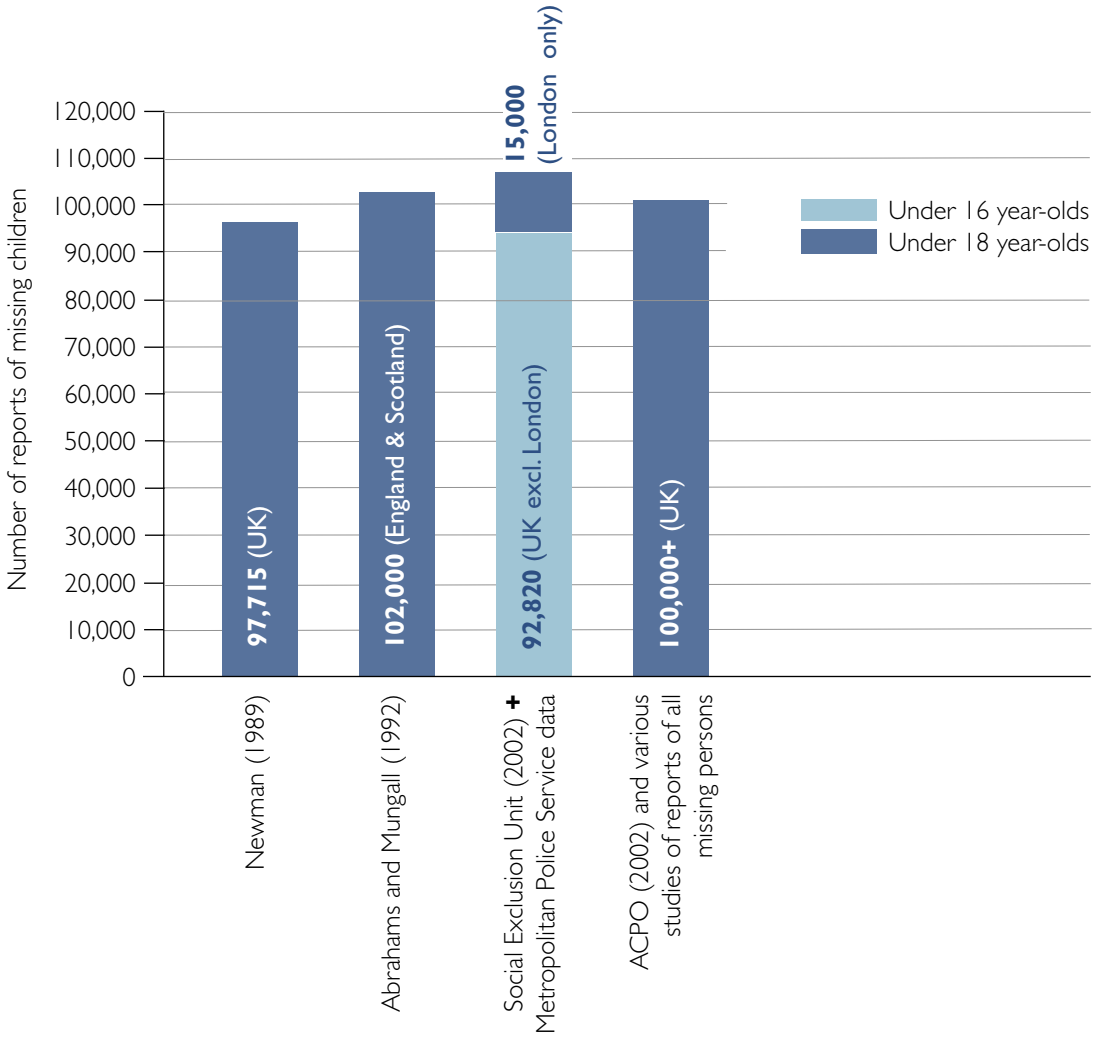


Whilst the findings from these studies are not directly comparable because they use different age groups, it seems reasonable to conclude that at least two-thirds of all reports of missing persons made to the police concern young people. When applied to the ACPO estimate of an annual total of 150,000 reports of missing persons, it suggests that at least 100,000 of these will concern young people.

Figure 2 provides a summary of the different estimates that have been made of the number of reports of missing children made to the police.

Abrahams and Mungall (1992) offered not only an estimate of the total number of reports or incidents of missing children (102,000) but also the actual number of individual children from which these reports were generated. This final figure

Fig. 2 Estimates of the number of reports of missing children made to the police



was estimated to be 43,000. This is an important finding, as it indicates that each young person who goes missing does so on average 2.4 times per year, inflating the number of incidents considerably.

However, it is likely that the average of 2.4 incidents per missing child masks considerably higher levels of missing incidents amongst a small number of children who repeatedly run away from either care or home (see page 45).

Whilst at the local level police officers are likely to be aware of the children who repeatedly go missing, current recording practices and systems prohibit a comprehensive national analysis of this problem. Only by electronically linking individual missing children with each of their respective missing incidents would such a valuable analysis be made possible. The need to improve the police recording of missing children incidents is highlighted again in the recommendations

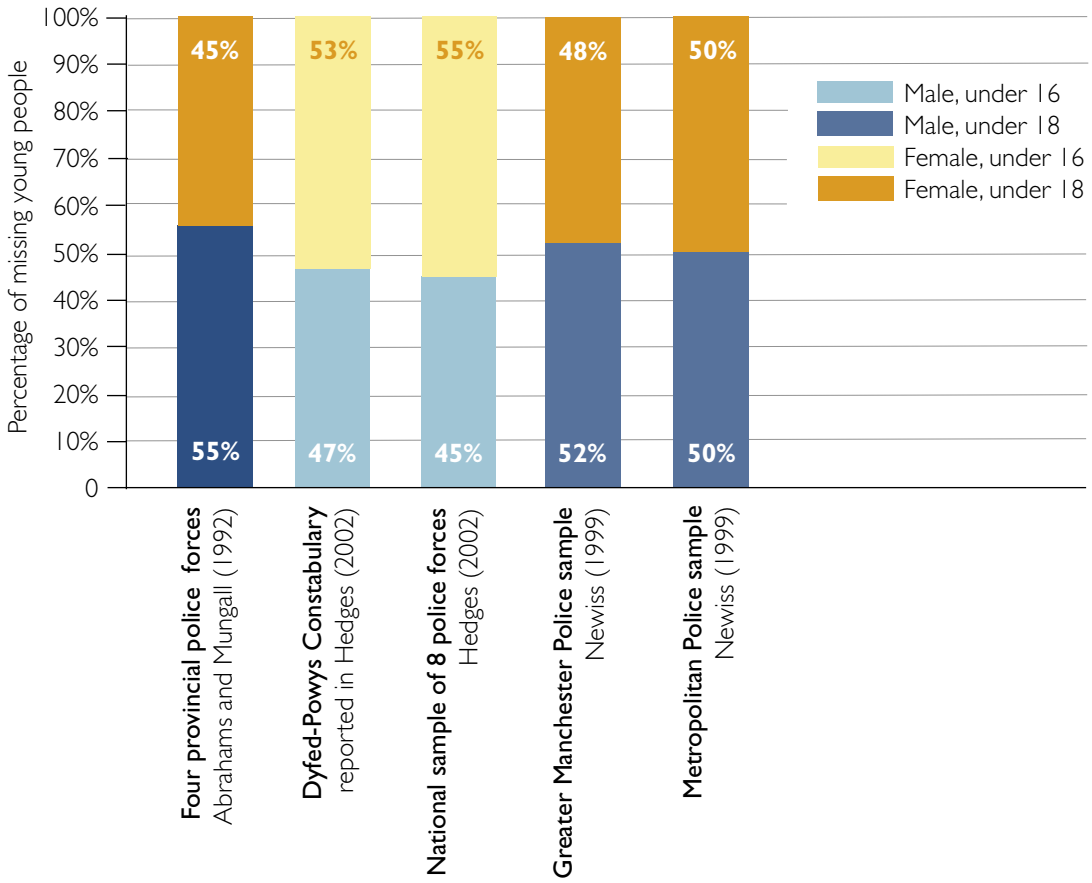
Characteristics of children reported missing to the police

Most studies based on police reports have contained an analysis of the general characteristics of the samples obtained. Whilst caution needs to be exercised when interpreting findings from police data, the studies still provide an overall picture of who goes missing. Unfortunately, the studies have only rarely differentiated between the different categories of missing children. They are therefore best regarded as a general description of the overall population of reports of missing children made to the police.

Sex distribution

Most studies of police sources have found little difference between the number of male and female children reported missing. Abrahams and Mungall (1992) showed a 55% to 45% split of males to females. Hedges (2002) found that 47% were males and 53% females (for those aged between 11 and 16) in his study of the Dyfed-Powys Constabulary and 45% males and 55% females in his study of eight police forces. Newiss (2004) reported that males accounted for 52% compared to

Fig. 3 Missing young people by sex based on police reports



48% females in a sample from the Greater Manchester Police, and an even 50/50 split from a sample taken from the Metropolitan Police Service in 1998–1999 (see Figure 3).

However, different patterns of the sex of missing children emerge when age is taken into account (see Figure 5, page 44).

Age distribution

It is difficult to compare the ages of children reported missing to the police in different studies because invariably findings are presented using different age groups. This is frustrating and does nothing to make our understanding of the phenomenon clearer. Findings from four main studies are shown in Figure 4 below.

Whilst the picture is confused by a lack of common age grouping, it does seem fairly clear that older children account for a disproportionately large number of reports. In three of the four studies (excluding

Fig. 4 Age of children reported missing to the police

Note: percentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding

Fig. 4a Abrahams and Mungall (1992)

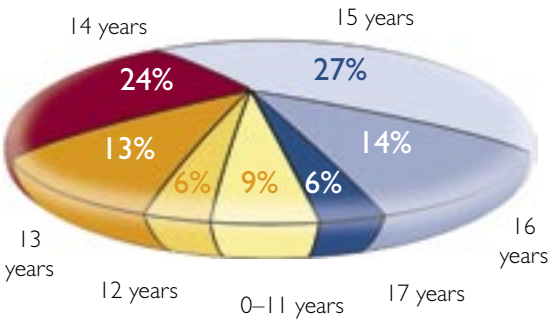


Fig. 4b Hedges (2002)

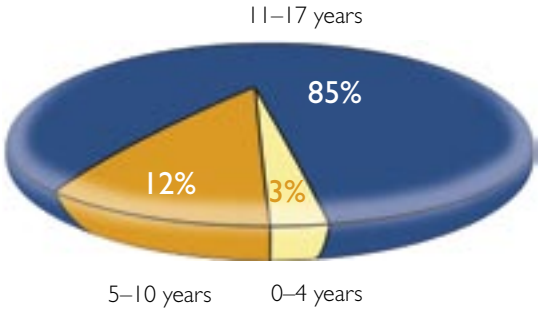


Fig. 4c Newiss (2004)

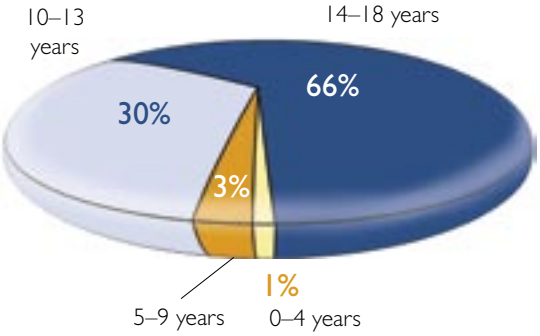
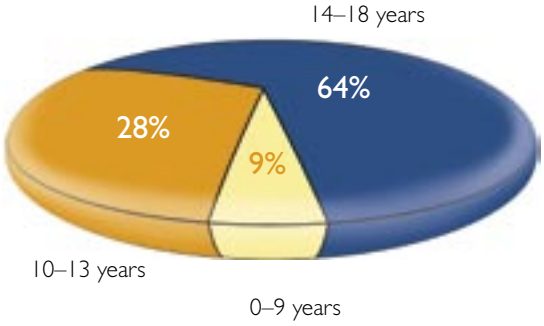


Fig. 4d Tarling and Burrows (2004)



Hedges (2002), where the reported age distribution cannot be compared) children over the age of 13 accounted for approximately two-thirds of missing persons' reports. Abrahams and Mungall's study indicated that 14 and 15 year-olds alone accounted for more than 50% of all reported disappearances.

That said, the studies show that younger children are also reported in sizeable numbers. Abrahams and Mungall (1992) found that 9% of children reported missing were under the age of 12. Tarling and Burrow's study found that the same proportion (9%) of missing children were under the age of 10 and 15% of Hedges' Dyfed-Powys' sample were under the age of 11.

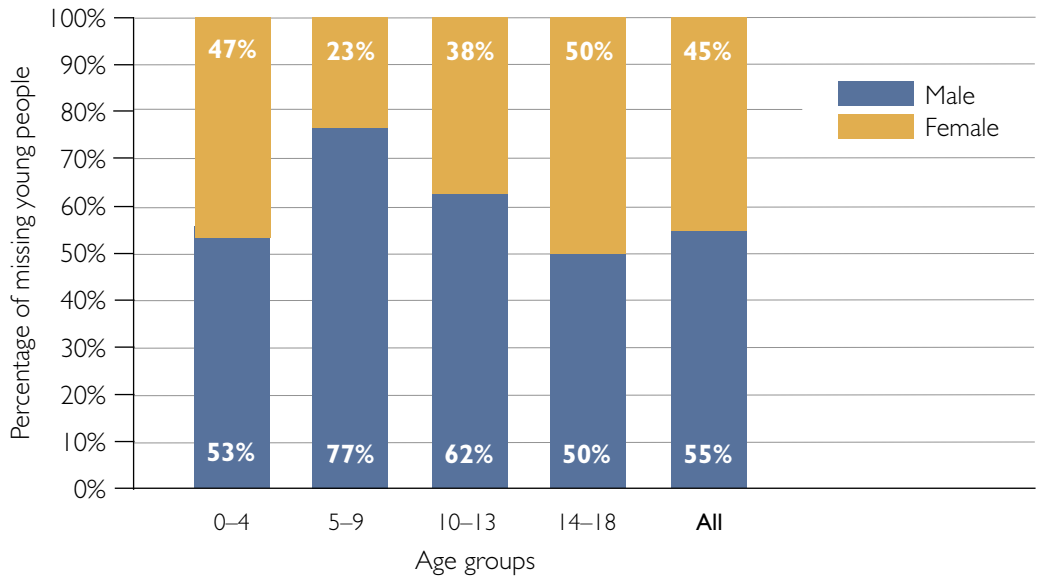
Age and sex distribution

Newiss (2004) used data from one (unnamed) police force as the basis for establishing – by age and by sex – the risk of a missing person being the victim of homicide. In the process, he presents a valuable breakdown on the proportion of male and female children by different age groups. This has been reproduced in Figure 5.

Interestingly, the table shows that whilst overall there were 55% males to 45% females in this sample, the proportions differed considerably within each age group. There were more males in each of the younger age groups up to and including 10 to 13 year-olds. But it should be noted that

Fig. 5 Proportion of male and female reports of missing children by age group

Source: Newiss, 2004



these age groups represent on average only one-third of all reports of missing children (Figure 4). In the older age group of 14 to 18 year-olds an equal split of males and females was found.

Data from the various studies indicate that males predominate in the younger age categories. For children over the age of 14, there is some evidence that there is a more even split between the number of reports of male and female children received by the police.

Ethnicity

Few of the studies using police data sources have reported on the ethnicity of missing children. One exception is Abrahams and Mungall (1992) who indicated that Afro-Caribbeans (as defined at the time of their study) were more likely to runaway than white or Asian young people. However, it must be noted that some ethnic groups may be more unwilling to report a child as missing than others as this may be considered shameful in their community.

Features of missing episodes

Police data on missing children do not give us a clear indication of the features of missing episodes because of the limited amount of information recorded on missing persons' forms. Many studies are based solely on management information, usually limited to counts of missing persons by age and sex.

Whilst considerably more can be said about the features of missing children's episodes in the next chapter, a number of findings from police sources can be highlighted here.

Frequency of missing episodes

Abrahams and Mungall (1992) reported that 65% of missing young people had gone missing only once in 1991 (this is relatively low compared to estimates derived from other data sources – see next chapter).

Duration of missing episodes

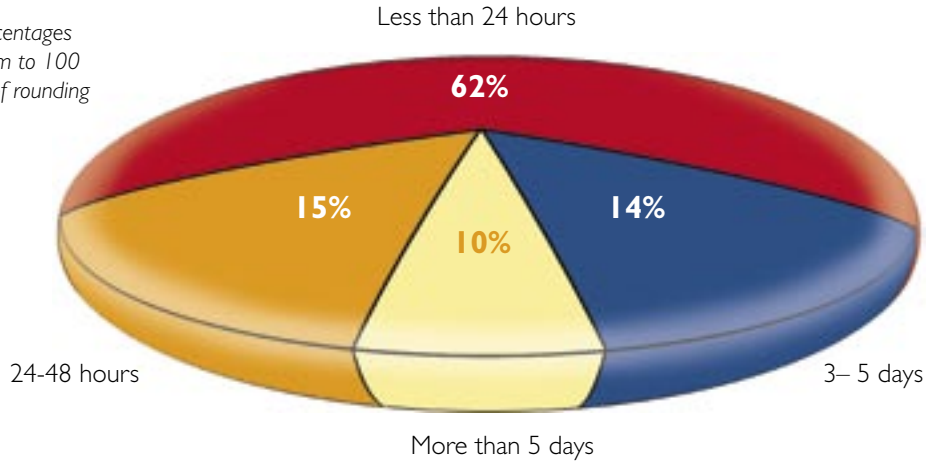
Most disappearances were resolved fairly quickly. Both the Abrahams and Mungall and the Tarling and Burrow's studies indicated that roughly three-quarters of incidents were cancelled within 48 hours, rising to over 90% within five days (see Figure 6, page 46).

Newiss (2005) examined data collected from the Police National Missing Persons Bureau which acts as a national 'clearing house' and repository for all missing persons' cases which remain unresolved after 14 days. The study focused solely on cases which had remained outstanding for more than one year. 26% of Newiss' sample were aged 18 or under, and two-thirds of those were aged between 14 and 18. He too found that when compared to the total number of reports of missing persons, young people who went missing were unlikely to feature as long-term cases.

Fig. 6 Duration of missing episodes as a percentage of all runaway incidents

Source: Abrahams and Mungall (1992)

Note: percentages do not sum to 100 because of rounding



What happens to missing children?

Research on what happens to children reported missing – using police data sources – is in its infancy in the UK. In his study which examined the risks of missing persons being victims of homicide, Newiss found that the overall risk was low for all young people (with 5 to 9 year-old females facing the highest risk with 1 in every 700 reports resulting in homicide). Older children were even less likely to be the victim of homicide, although the percentage risks were low because of the very high number of reports of missing children in these age groups rather than because of the absence of actual homicide cases.

International comparisons

Before leaving this section, we can gauge the extent of the problem of missing children in this country by comparing the situation here with that in other countries.

Comparisons of this nature are best illustrated by establishing the incidence of going missing in any one country as a rate per 1,000 of the overall child population. In the UK, assuming an average of 100,000 reports of missing children made to the police each year and a total under-18 population of 13.4 million (the figure for 2001, though it has been falling since), the rate is approximately 7.5 reports per 1,000 of the child population.

In the US, NISMART estimated a rate for the actual number of children reported missing in 1999 (as opposed to the rate of reports) of 11.4 missing children per 1,000 of the child population in the US (see page 28). This rate was based on an estimated total number of missing children for the same year of 797,500 (Sedlak, *et al*, 2002).

If one were to apply the US rate to the UK then the total number of children reported missing in this country in 1999 would have

been approximately 154,000. This figure is much higher than the estimated 100,000 reported incidents of missing children and more than four times the Abrahams and Mungall (1992) estimated 43,000 individual missing children.

By comparison researchers in Australia have calculated a much smaller rate of children going missing. Henderson and Henderson (1997) found 15,600 incidents of missing children were reported to the police in 1997, at a rate of 3.4 reports per 1,000 of the child population. In the UK context this would be the equivalent of receiving approximately 46,000 missing persons' reports.

International comparisons are always problematic, as definitions and counting rules differ, not to mention the differences in environments and cultures, for example in people's propensity to report incidents. These comparisons are interesting because at present it is simply impossible to know how much the difference between the rates of children going missing are the result of variable recording and data collection practices or real differences in the incidence of children going missing.

Conclusions

It is difficult to draw clear conclusions about the number of children who go missing every year in the UK based on police reports.

Undercounting occurs because not all young people who go missing are reported to the police (cases of thrownaways and parental abductions rarely come to the attention of the police). Overcounting arises because the police record missing episodes and not the actual number of individual children who go missing (if a child goes missing four times a year and he/she is reported to the police, four incidents will be recorded).

The way incidents are recorded by the police is not always reliable. Police forces have different policies, responses, and recording methods. There is also a lack of systematic recording of cases and no requirement for police forces to report the number of cases they receive each year.

Finally, unlike the NISMART reports, which selected wide samples guaranteeing representation of all regions of the United States and all levels of urbanisation, in the UK, most studies drawn from police reports were based on relatively small samples and/or in limited geographical areas.

Chapter 4

Studies of Runaways and Thrownaways

Of all the NISMART categories of missing children, the plight of runaways and thrownaways has attracted the most interest from researchers in the UK. Some of the key studies that have been produced over the last twenty years are shown below.

Key studies

- Barter, Keep and Macleod (1996) *Children at Crisis Point.* London: Childline.
- Biehal, Mitchell and Wade (2003) *Lost From View: Missing Persons in the UK*. Bristol: The Policy Press.
- Keep (2000) *No Home and Alone*. London: Childline.
- Mitchell (2003) *Can I Come Home? The Experiences of Young Runaways Contacting the Message Home Helpline.* Child and Family Social Work, 8
- Rees (1993) *Hidden Truths – Young people's experiences of running away.* London: The Children's Society.
- Safe on the Streets Research Team (1999) *Still Running: Children on the Streets in the UK.* London: The Children's Society.
- Stein, Rees and Frost (1994) *Running – The Risk: Young People on the Streets of Britain Today.* London: The Children's Society.
- Wade and Biehal (1998) *Going Missing: Young People Absent from Care.* Chichester: John Wiley & Co.

Studies of runaways and thrownaways have used a number of different methods of research and data sources. Some have used more than one method and data source as part of the same study. For example, the Safe on the Streets Research Team (1999) conducted in-depth interviews of children who had run away in the past, as well as telephone interviews with professionals (police officers, social workers, etc) involved with runaways.

Together these studies amount to an impressive body of work offering detailed and reliable information. A brief summary of what the studies can tell us about the phenomenon of missing children is given below. But first, it is worthwhile reviewing the methods and data sources both to understand their limitations and what they can offer by way of lessons for future data collection.

Methods and data sources

Surveys of young people

Conducting surveys of representative samples of young people is the most reliable and scientifically valid method of obtaining accurate estimates of the number of runaways and thrownaways in the UK.

Several such studies have been conducted so far in the UK (though four are in fact part of the same large-scale research programme), drawing randomly selected samples of young people from either school registers ('school surveys') or from lists of households ('household surveys').

In both types the respondents were asked whether they had ever been missing from home and, if so, what was their experience of the incident (so-called 'self-report' studies). Whilst both types of survey offer the distinct advantage of not being dependent on reports of missing children to the police, like all research methods they too have their limitations.

School surveys will, by definition, exclude children who are not registered at schools. By the same token, children who play truant are less likely, because of their poor school attendance, to be included in surveys.

Similarly, surveys drawing samples from lists of private households will systematically exclude certain children, for example, those who are homeless, or living in custodial institutions or residential care. Given that we would expect such children to have relatively high rates of running away, the exclusions arising from the design of household surveys are potentially quite harmful to the accuracy of any estimates produced.

Another important limitation of school and household surveys in the UK has been the concentration on children self-reporting previous missing episodes. Used exclusively, this method of course prevents children who actually are missing (either as a result of a long-term disappearance or simply going missing on the day of interview) from participating in the research. Whilst this is unlikely greatly to affect the estimates for runaways and thrownaways, it perhaps has a greater impact on our ability to measure the extent of other types of missing episode (for example, abductions).

It should be acknowledged that school and household surveys in the UK were never designed to measure the full spectrum of missing episodes (indeed, the household surveys were commissioned predominantly to measure levels of crime and drug-taking rather than of going missing).

It seems likely that valuable lessons can be learnt here from the NISMART experience

in the US, where surveys of parents have provided one of a series of measures not currently available in the UK, which complements child self-report surveys. Interestingly, Sedlak *et al* (2002) reported that 1.6 times more incidents of children going missing were recalled by adult caretakers (mainly parents) than were recorded by the police or other agencies (see Table 1, page 28).

Studies of service users

There are a number of agencies in the UK that offer services to children who have run away or been thrown away, as well as to the friends and families left behind. A number of studies have utilised the data held by these agencies (notably the National Missing Persons Helpline and Childline) to study the problem of children going missing. Whilst such studies can often produce very detailed accounts of individual cases and circumstances, they are inadequate measures of the real extent of the problem. It is not certain what proportion of runaways/thrownaways use the service of these agencies and whether those that do are representative of all missing children.

Studies of children attending refuges and other projects

Other agencies in the UK offer more immediate services to children such as emergency accommodation and support. Again researchers have utilised these refuge centers as resources for collecting information directly from children who have run away or been thrown away, and in some cases from the staff working at the agencies.

Like the studies of service users (above) it is difficult to know how representative of all missing children the findings from these studies are. Most of the studies are based in specific refuges or centres and offer little insight into the situation in wider geographical areas. But it seems reasonable to assume that, in many instances, they highlight the circumstances of children who are most at risk in our society (those who have been living on the streets and/or have had particularly traumatic lives). As a result, research involving young people using these services is likely to expose the extreme difficulties faced by missing children.

The remainder of this chapter summarises briefly the main findings of these studies and their contribution to our understanding of the missing children phenomenon in this country.

Estimates of the number of runaways and thrownaways

The most reliable estimates of how many children run away or are thrown away from home come from the school and household surveys described above.

Estimates based on school surveys

The first school study was conducted by Rees (1993) who interviewed 1,234 school children in Leeds. Later, a major research study was undertaken by the Safe on the Streets Research Team, which interviewed 13,000 children in schools throughout the UK. As well as their main report published in 1999, separate reports were released for Scotland (Wade, 2002), Wales (Mitchell *et al*, 2002) and Northern Ireland (Raws, 2001).

In each of these studies, the young people interviewed were asked whether they had spent time away from home before the age of 16, either without permission, or as a result of being forced to leave by their parent or carer. They were also asked if on any of these occasions they had spent at least one night away. Given that the studies included 14 and 15 year-olds who had not yet reached their 16th birthday, they are likely to provide an underestimate of the prevalence of going missing.

Even so, each of these studies found that between 16% and 18% of young people reported that they had run away or been thrown away at least once before their 16th birthday. Between 9% and 14% reported they had gone missing overnight (see Figure 7, page 55).

Estimates based on household Surveys

Two household surveys of young people in England and Wales were commissioned by the Home Office, the *Young People and Crime Survey* (conducted in 1992–1993) which interviewed 2,500 14 to 25 year-olds, and the *Youth Lifestyles Survey* (conducted in 1998–1999) which interviewed 5,000 12 to 30 year-olds. The major findings of the surveys were on offending behaviour and drug use and can be found in Graham and Bowling (1995), Flood-Page *et al* (2000) and Goulden and Sondhi (2001). With the exception of Goulden and Sondhi, the findings presented little information on runaways. However, under further analysis by PACT's Research Team, both surveys have yielded useful information on runaways.

In each survey respondents were asked whether they had ever run away from home and stayed away for at least one night without telling their parents or guardians where they were. Those over 16 were only asked about running away before the age of 16 – any incidents occurring at or over the age of 16 were not recorded.

Figure 7 shows that at 6%, the proportion of those who reported staying away overnight was lower than in the school surveys.

The differences between the findings of the two types of survey may be attributable to a number of factors. The samples were drawn from different sources each with its own limitations, as described above. Going missing was only a secondary consideration in the household surveys and this may have affected response rates. The wording of the household surveys was more focused on inviting positive responses from runaways than from thrownaways; and this may have reduced the number of declared missing episodes.

The Safe on the Streets Research Team (1999), using their findings from the school surveys, were able to provide an estimate of the number of incidents of young people running away or being thrown away and staying away overnight. They estimated that one in nine young people (11%) under the age of 16 ran away or were forced to leave home and stayed away overnight; that 77,000 ran away for the first time each year; and that there were 129,000 running away overnight incidents each year in the UK. There was no evidence of significant difference in running away rates between the four countries of the UK; between different kinds of area (i.e. rural/suburban/city); or between high income and low income brackets.

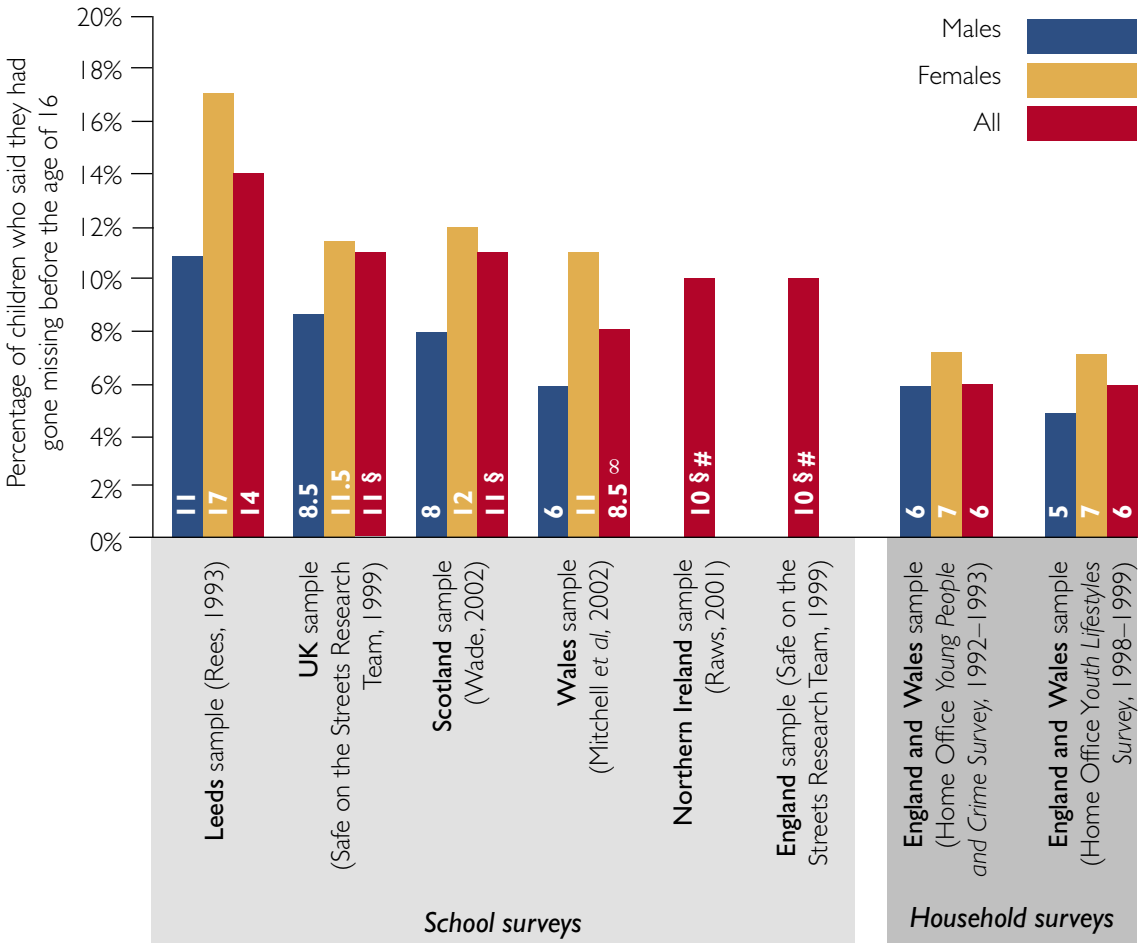
Whilst not directly comparable, it is interesting to note the difference between the Safe on the Streets Research Team's total and the ACPO estimation of 100,000 incidents of missing children reported to the police each year (see Figure 2, page 40). Given that the school surveys were only on runaways and throwaways and only covered overnight missing episodes before the respondents were 16 years old, it suggests that the police figure might well under estimate the total number of all incidents of missing children.

Finally, the Safe on the Streets Research Team also asked young people what had led them to leave home. The Research Team found that nearly one fifth (19%) defined themselves as thrownaways, having, they said, been forced to leave home. The Team estimated that 14,000 young people in each school year were forced to leave home before the age of 16. In their study, '*Thrown away: the experiences of children forced to leave home*', (2004) Rees and Siakeu estimated at least 15,000 under 16 year-olds were forced to leave home every year and that more females (58%) were forced to leave home than males.

In other studies, Barter *et al* (1996) found that one third of the young people who called Childline had been thrown out by their parents or carers. Mitchell (2003) reported that 22% of children calling the National Missing Persons Message Home

Helpline* had been forced to leave home. However, Newman (1989) found that only 6% of males and 4% of females attending the Central London Teenage Project had been thrown out of their homes.

Fig. 7 Percentage of young people who said they had gone missing and stayed away overnight at least once before the age of 16



∞ Mitchell *et al* (2002) do not give a national figure for Wales but a range for cities (9–11%), for other urban areas (10–12%) and for rural areas (5–10%). The figure of 8.5 is taken from the Safe on the Streets Research Team (1999).

§ Estimate based on the projected rate of running away for all respondents, up to their 16th birthdays.

Data for males and females are not available.

* *The National Missing Persons Helpline (NMPH) was established as a charity in 1992 to find missing persons and to support those left behind. It gives priority to the vulnerable. The charity also offers its services to organisations outside the family circle: police, social workers, hospitals, care homes, coroners, foster homes and international organisations. NMPH operates three freephone helplines. A new helpline (the Runaway Helpline) is specifically for children aged 17 and under.*

Characteristics of runaways and thrownaways

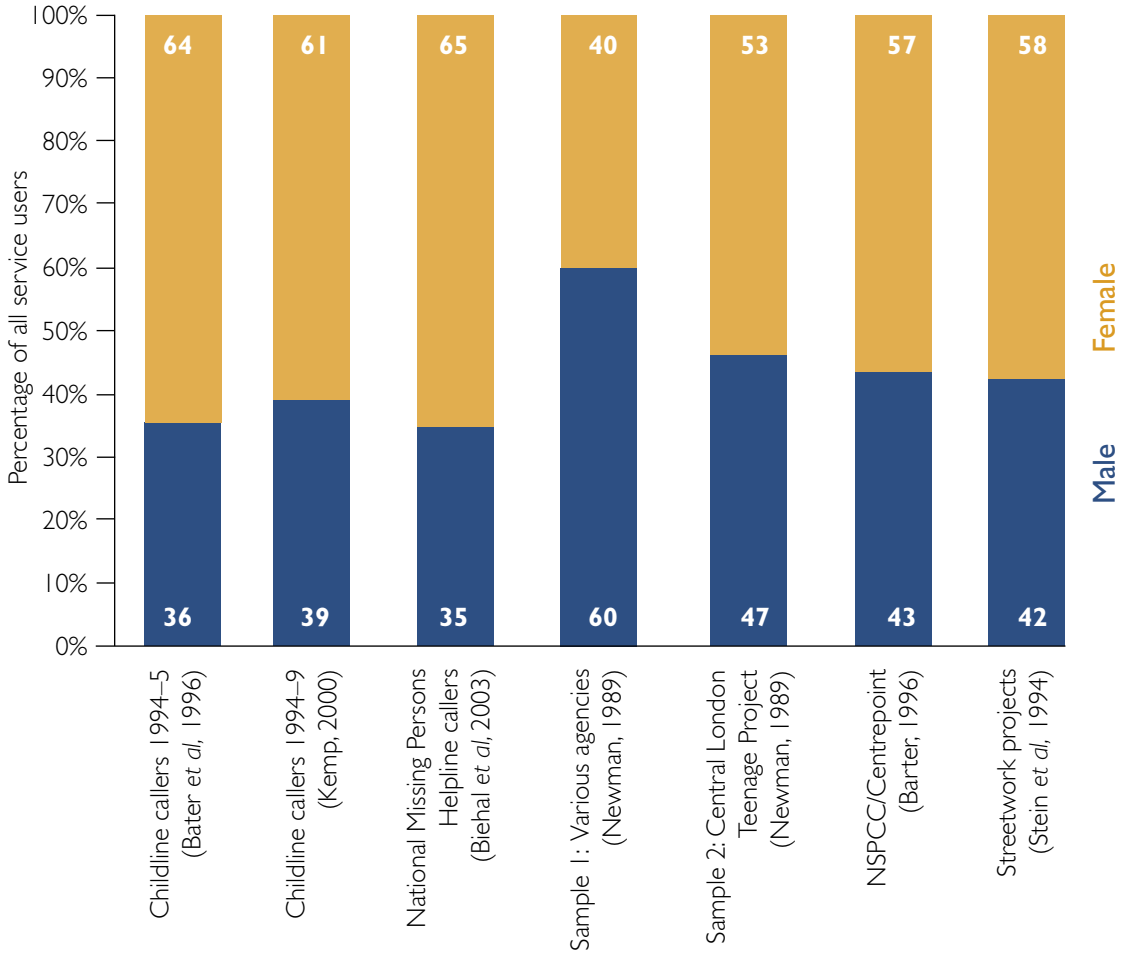
Sex distribution

Figure 7 shows the proportion of male and female young people in both the school and household surveys who reported that they had gone missing overnight on at least one occasion before their 16th birthday. In each survey, girls were found to be more likely to have runaway or been thrown away. Using data from the school surveys, but focusing exclusively on thrownaways, Rees and Siakeu (2004) also found that there were more girls than boys (58% of the thrownaways were female).

A similar pattern emerges from most of the smaller scale studies of callers to helplines and attendees at projects and refuge centers (see Figure 8). Again, there were usually more females than males.

However, as seen in the previous chapter, studies based on police reports found little difference between male and female children reported missing (see Figure 3, page 42).

Fig. 8 Percentage of young people using help services by sex



Age distribution

Just as the majority of reports of missing children made to the police concern older children (over 14 years old), estimates based on school and household surveys found that most children who ran away or were thrown away did so when they reached middle to late adolescence. Figure 9 shows the findings from the school and household surveys.

Rees and Siakeu (2004), using school survey data, found that thrownaways tended to be slightly older than runaways, with a peak age of 15 and 16.

However, a substantial minority first ran away or were thrown away before the age of 11. According to the Safe on the Streets Research Team, a quarter of runaways started running away before the age of 11.

Studies of calls to helplines found similar results. 10% of callers to Childline in 1998/99 were aged 11 and under (Keep, 2000) (see Figure 10). An earlier study using the same source found 25% were 12 or younger (Barter *et al,* 1996). Biehal *et al* (2003) reported that 27% of young people who contacted the National Missing Persons Helpline were under 13.

Fig. 9 Age of young people when first went missing

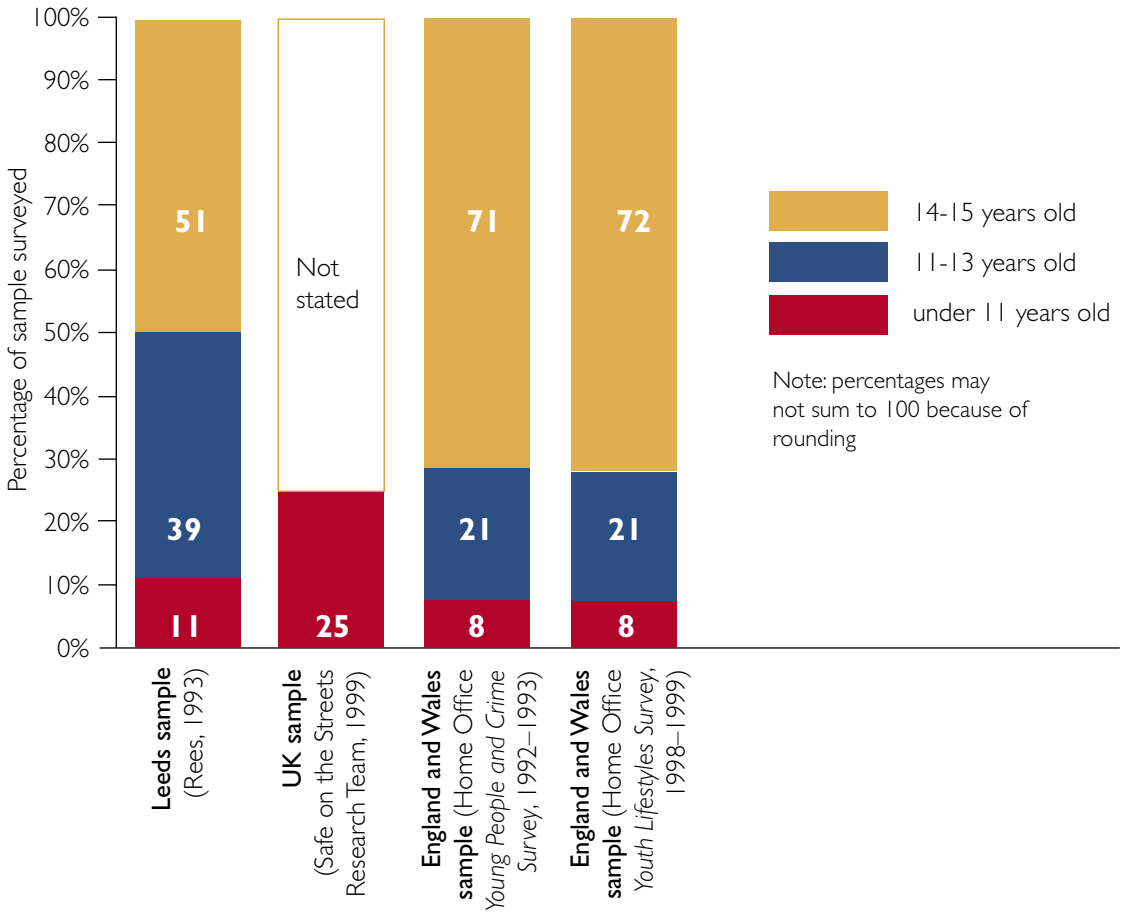
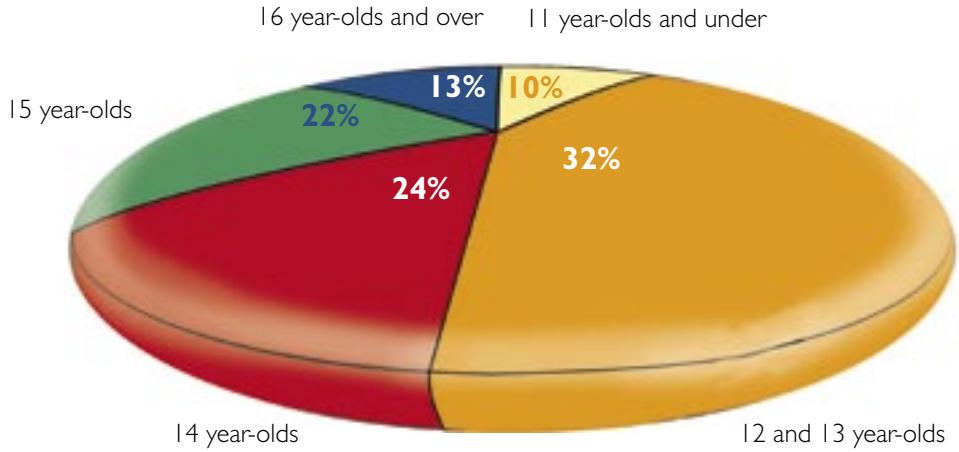


Fig. 10 Runaway callers by age to Childline 1998–1999
Source: Keep (2000)

Note: percentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding



Ethnicity

Early studies (for example by Rees, 1993) seemed to indicate that Afro-Caribbeans were more likely to run away or be thrown away than white or Asian children (see Figure 11). Whilst later surveys have not confirmed this result (tending towards greater parity in the rates of going missing between white and Afro-Caribbeans), all have suggested that the rate of going missing amongst Asian young people is comparatively low.

Frequency of going missing

The Safe on the Streets Research Team (1999) found that 54% of young people had said that they had gone missing on only one occasion. A quarter had been missing on two occasions and between one in six and one in seven had said that they had been missing repeatedly, on more than three occasions.

A very similar pattern of going missing was identified in the Home Office household surveys (see Figure 12). Whilst the largest proportion of children going missing only did so once (45% in the 1992/93 survey and 55% in the 1998/99 survey), a substantial number (again between one in six and one in seven) reported going missing on more than three occassions.

Rees' (1993) study of children in Leeds found that a lower proportion had runaway once (two-fifths) and rather more twice or three times; but that the proportion that had gone missing on more than three occasions was similar at 16%.

These figures seem to indicate a larger proportion of runaways going missing repeatedly than was estimated by Abrahams and Mungall in their 1993 study using police data (see previous chapter). These varying results once again undermine our ability to estimate the number of children who go missing every year in the UK.

Fig. 11 Rate of going missing by ethnic group

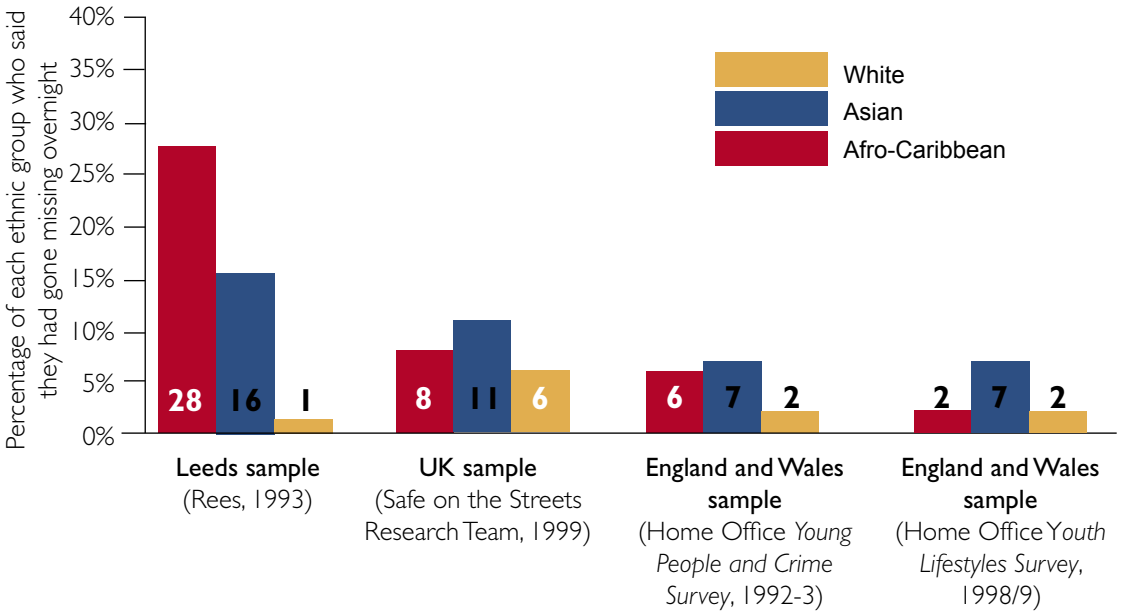
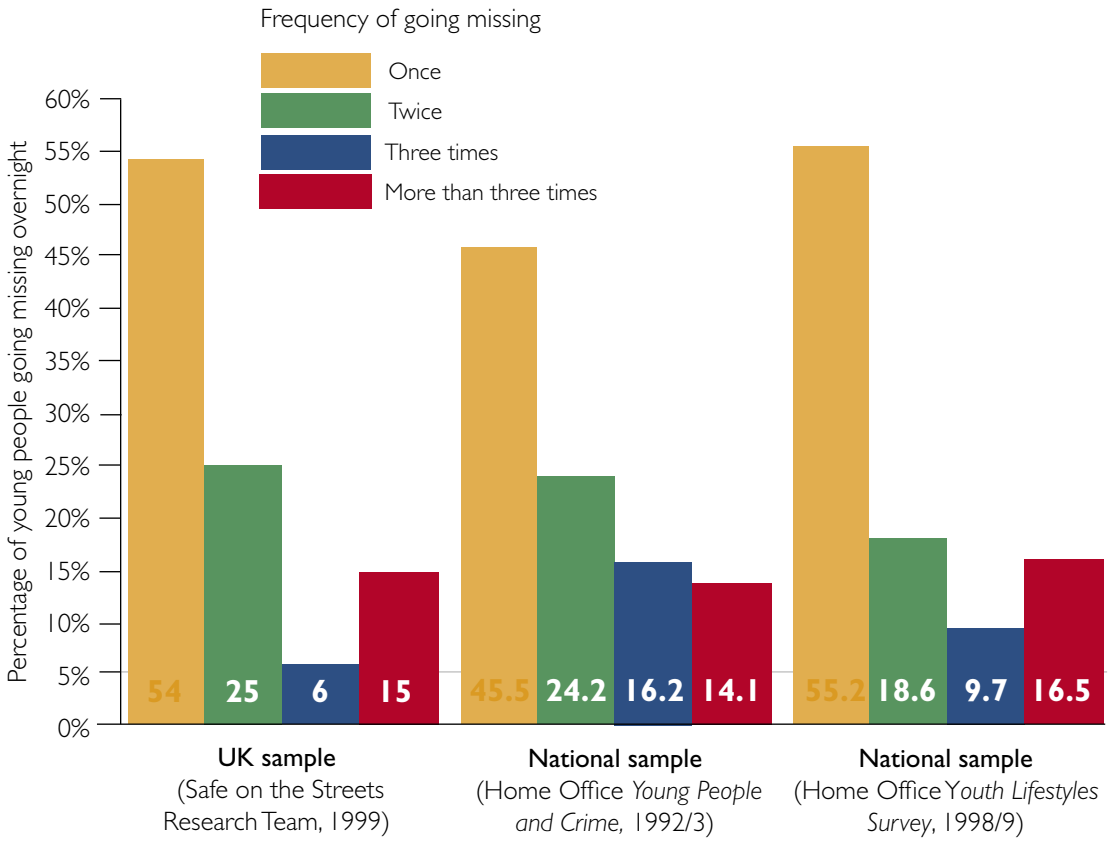


Fig. 12 Percentage of young people going missing and staying away overnight by number of occasions



Reasons for going missing

The use of surveys designed specifically to capture information on missing episodes has produced a wealth of information on factors associated with going missing. This is in stark contrast to the information traditionally available from police sources (missing persons' forms) which often provides little account of what actually caused a disappearance.

Whilst the aim of this report is not to produce an exhaustive summary of all such factors, key learning points from various studies are presented below as an illustration of the level of information available using survey methods with representative samples of young people. Extending this method to parents or caretakers would present policymakers and researchers in the UK with the same type of specific information with a much greater coverage of all types of missing children episode.

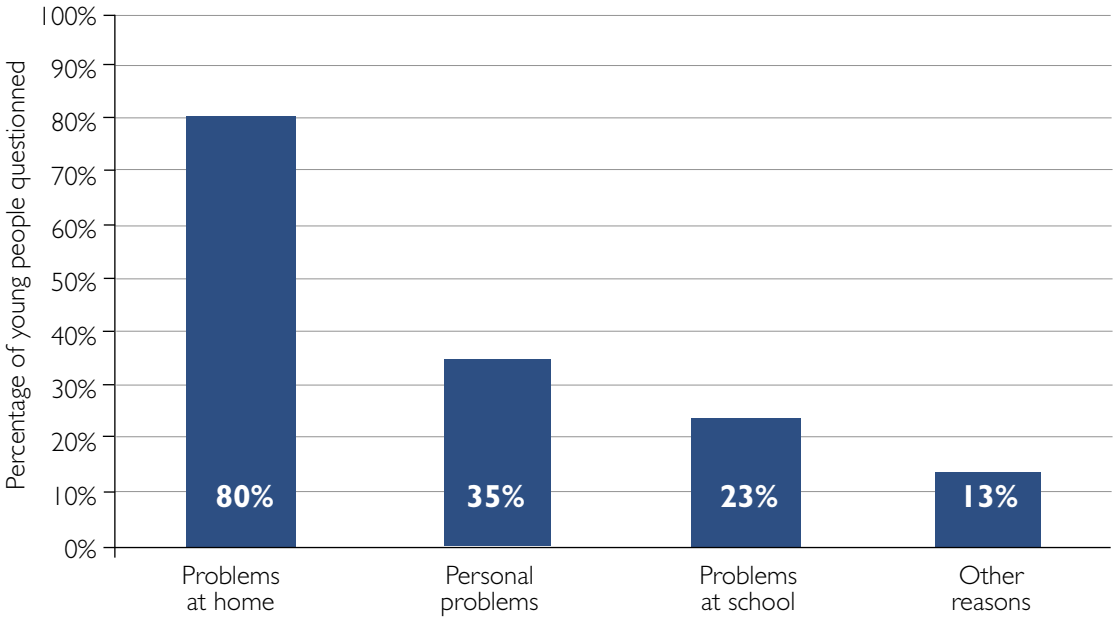
The Safe on the Streets Research Team (1999) found that young people who had run, or had been thrown, away attributed going missing to four broad reasons, which are shown in Figure 13.

Young people could state more than one reason for going missing but the most frequent one was 'problems at home'.

From the detailed accounts given, the Research Team then attempted to identify in further detail the reasons why these young people ran away and what triggered the actual episode. Many young people (just over a quarter) did not elaborate on the broad reason given for going missing, so no further gradation was possible. But the rest reported a variety of reasons why they had runaway.

Fig. 13 Reasons given by young people for running away

Source: Safe on the Streets Research Team (1999)



This further examination confirmed that family disruption and discord are the overlying causes of children running away or being thrown away (family conflict, physical abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect).

Physical and sexual abuse

The Safe on the Streets Research Team (1999) also showed that a significant proportion of young people ran away to escape physical and sexual abuse. Occasional runaways were seven times, and repeat runaways seventeen times, more likely to say they had been 'hit a lot' by their parents than young people who did not run away. Further analysis revealed that children who start running away at a young age are more likely to be physically abused by a parent.

In the Scottish component of this national survey (Wade, 2002), 19% of runaways said that the last time they had done so, they had left because of physical, emotional or sexual abuse, neglect or rejection by their family. 6% left because of physical abuse, 5% because of emotional abuse, and 7% because of rejection or neglect. Over 50% of the subset of 37 young people interviewed in depth in the Scottish study said that they had left because of physical violence and 11% because they had been sexually abused by a family member.

Factors associated with going missing

Conducting surveys with young people has also allowed researchers to link incidences of children going missing with a number of associated factors. Again, this list is not intended to be exhaustive, but to illustrate the types of analysis that have been performed:

- Rees and Rutherford (2001) analysed the school survey data and found that young people from two-parent families were only half as likely to run away or be thrown away as young people from lone-parent families; and only a third as likely as young people from step-parent families.

- In addition, Rees and Rutherford (2001) found that the quality of family relationships (measured using a variety of indicators such as feeling understood, feeling cared for, etc) was critical to the likelihood of a child running away or being thrown away.

- They also indicated that many children who went missing had problems with their schooling. Young people who had run away overnight expressed more negative views about school than those who had never run away.

- Wade (2002) found that 5% of their sample reported mental health problems as the primary reason for running away; 25% of the sample reported mental health problems, although this may not have been their primary reason for running away.

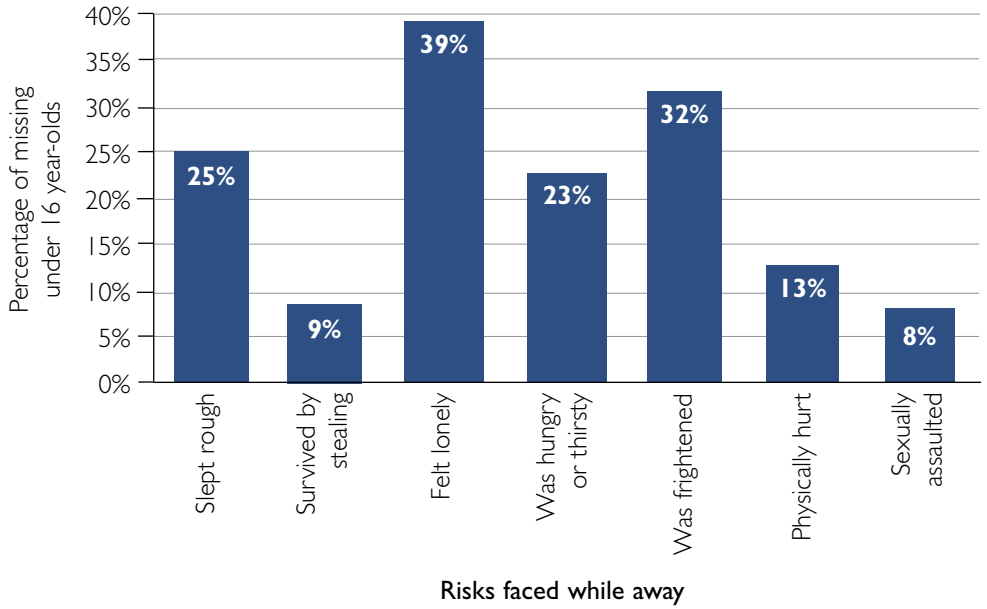
- Children who ran away frequently were considerably more likely to have had problems with drugs and alcohol or been in trouble with the police. (Rees and Smeaton, 2001; Home Office surveys).

Risks associated with going missing

The existing surveys in the UK have also been used to profile the nature and extent of the risks facing children who run away or are thrown away. Findings from the Safe on the Streets Research Team (1999) are shown in Figure 14.

- Rees and Rutherford (2001) found that children who had run away (or had been thrown away) from two-parent families were more likely to sleep rough than those from lone-parent families or step-parent families.
- The Safe on the Streets Research Team (1999) reported that 9% of young people survived by stealing whilst away.
- The same team found that 13% of runaways/thrownaways were physically hurt while away, and 8% were sexually assaulted (see Fig 14).

Fig. 14 **Risks faced by young people while away from home**
Source: Safe on the Streets Research Team (1999)



Conclusions

Studies of runaways and thrownaways have provided a wealth of information on a specific section of the missing children population in the UK. In particular, the use of representative surveys has substantially contributed to our knowledge of the problem.

Surveys are the most scientifically robust means of estimating the size of the missing children population. The largest survey (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999), which asked school children throughout the UK about their experiences of running away, estimated that there are nearly 130,000 incidents of children under the age of 16 running or being thrown away from their homes overnight each year. Even though this study focused solely on runaways and thrownaways under the age of 16, this is a considerably higher figure than the ones based on police data sources which included all types of missing children.

Surveys also improve our understanding of the nature and the causes of why children run away or are thrown away and what happens to them whilst they are away. This is particularly important if we are to formulate effective responses. The NISMART experience would indicate that extending the use of surveys to parents as well as children would provide even more reliable and valuable information.

Whilst the experience of using surveys for these purposes is considerable, they alone do not provide a clear picture of the overall missing children situation in the UK. The surveys conducted so far have focused on a specific sub-section of the missing children population (runaways/thrownaways) but this has not formed part of a cohesive programme of work to measure and investigate all incidents of children going missing. In the absence of such a programme we are left to examine numerous different data sources which individually provide a part of the picture but together fail to provide the whole picture.

There is now an urgent need to prepare and implement a coordinated and strategic plan for the full provision of all data requirements on the missing children population. This plan must recognise that data needs to be collected periodically so that changes in the nature and extent of the problem, for runaways, thrownaways and all types of missing children, can be monitored. Without such a plan, our responses to the problem will continue to be hampered by a lack of clear understanding about what we are really dealing with.

Chapter 5
Studies of Child Abductions

The first two categories listed in the NISMART missing typology are family abductions and non-family abductions (which includes 'stereotypical kidnapping'). In this section, we will examine data sources in the UK.

Key studies and data sources

- Erikson and Friendship (2002) *A Typology of Child Abduction Events.* Legal and Criminological Psychology, 7
- Newiss and Fairbrother (2004) *Child abduction: understanding police recorded crime statistics.* Findings paper 225. London: Home Office.
- Statistics on offences of child abduction are published annually by the Home Office in *Crime in England and Wales*.

Before we consider the data available in the UK on these two NISMART categories of abductions, it is worthwhile highlighting the conceptual difference between an abduction and a missing child's case. In short, whilst certainly not all missing children will have been abducted, neither will all victims of abduction be necessarily considered to be missing.

Take, for example, a situation where a non-custodial parent (family abductions) takes the child and refuses to return him/her. The custodial parent may know the whereabouts of the child but be unable to recover him/her. This case would not appear to meet the definition of a missing person offered by ACPO at the beginning of this report because the child's whereabouts are clearly known.

Even in more serious cases of 'stereotypical kidnapping' (to use the NISMART terminology), the victim will not qualify as a missing child if no one notices the child's disappearance or if the discovery of the child's body is the first evidence of the episode. It is only when a child's disappearance has been noticed and notified to the police that he/she will rightly be considered to be missing.

In this report we decided to take a broad approach to child abduction by examining all data sources that could describe the extent and nature of the problem.

Data sources and limitations

Missing persons' reports

Missing persons' reports made to the police have not proved to be a valuable source of data for understanding abductions. This is because, at least historically, the amount and quality of information recorded on missing persons' forms were often poor, in many cases providing no indication as to what actually happened to the child. In recent years there has been a concerted effort to ensure better recording of information on missing persons' forms.

Given that only a very small proportion of abductions are reported to and/or are recorded by the police, analysing missing persons' forms to identify a sufficient number of cases to permit meaningful analysis would be a long, expensive and inefficient method of research. The gradual increase in electronic recording of missing persons' cases, together with the use of specific 'outcome' codes (denoting what happened to the individual – including in abduction cases), should provide a much easier means by which researchers can identify and analyse such cases in the future.

Surveys

Self-report studies of young people are not a good source of information on abduction. The parentally abducted child may well be residing outside the country and thus missed by any household or school study. Those children that might be included may not always appreciate that they have been abducted, having been led to believe that they are with one parent and not the other for some different reason.

A survey of parents and guardians, in which the left-behind parent can report on the abduction of the child by the other parent, would be useful. Such research has been carried out in the USA under the NISMART programme (Hammer *et al*, 2002a and Finkelhor *et al*, 2002) (see page 79-80) but not in this country.

Other agencies' data

In the UK various agencies and government departments are involved in some manner with international parental child abduction, and in the course of their work they keep records of individual cases. Whilst these do not appear to be routinely published, or indeed analysed, they provide some information.

Information recorded in crime statistics

One of the principle sources of information on child abductions comes from incidents recorded as crimes by the police and reported annually by the Home Office in their statistical series *Crime in England and Wales*.

The recording of incidents by the police is a complex process governed by numerous rules and regulations and legal stipulations. The recording of abductions is no exception. Before May 2004 offences could fall into one of two offence categories: the sexual offence of 'abduction' and the violence offence of 'child abduction' ('Violence Against the Person'). Even then, many child abduction offences often appeared to be sexually motivated.

In May 2004 the offence of abduction was repealed as part of the implementation of the *Sexual Offences Act, 2003*. At the time of writing, it is still not entirely clear how offences which would previously have been recorded as abductions will now be recorded by the police. Some may be included within the violence category of child abduction and others may perhaps be recorded under other sexual offences. This may cause an increase in the number of recorded child abduction offences, a matter which should be monitored closely by the Home Office.

Whilst child abduction remains a crime category, it is important to note that offences can only be recorded by the police if the incident falls within the terms of the *Child Abduction Act, 1984.*

Section 1 of the Act deals with parental child abduction and makes it *'a criminal offence for any person connected with a child under the age of 16, to take or send the child out of the United Kingdom (for a period exceeding one month) without the consent of any other person who has parental responsibility for the child.'* (A parent who has the right to have contact with or access to a child will usually also have parental responsibility).

'Persons connected with a child' are *'the parents or guardians of a child and anyone who has parental responsibility for the child'*. 'The appropriate consent' is *'the consent of the mother, the father (if he has parental responsibility), guardian and anyone with a residence order or parental responsibility, or the leave of the court'.*

The same provisions apply in Scotland and Northern Ireland. The relevant Acts are the *Child Abduction Act 1984 (Scotland)* and the *Child Abduction (Northern Ireland) Act 1985*.

Section 2 of the *Child Abduction Act* deals with persons *'other than the child's mother, father or others covered in Section 1, who without lawful authority or reasonable excuse… takes or detains a child under the age of sixteen'.*

Underneath the legal jargon are some very important points. An incident of

child abduction reported to the police has to come within the legal definition described above otherwise it will not be recorded. This means that offences of child abduction will not include victims aged 16 or over. Abductions by parents will only be recorded if the child is taken out of the United Kingdom (therefore excluding domestic abductions) and only if the incident lasts longer than one month.

Another consideration to bear in mind when drawing conclusions from child abduction statistics is that the recording of all crimes by the police is also governed by a directive called the Principal Crime Rule. In incidents where more than one offence has taken place, for example if a child is abducted, raped and then murdered, the Principal Crime Rule requires that only the most serious offence is recorded by the police (in this example a crime of murder would be recorded). Whilst the rule prevents double counting of incidents within different crime categories, it unfortunately stops us from being able to identify all cases of child abduction. It is very difficult to know how many of them are excluded from the crime statistics because of this rule.

It follows that the full range of scenarios that we might commonly understand to be abductions are not necessarily described as such within the terms of what the police can record. This presents a serious limitation to what we can learn about child abduction using this data source. Unfortunately, at present, it remains pretty much the only source of statistics on child abductions in the UK (notwithstanding the contribution of different agencies' data on parental abductions). We believe this situation is unacceptable and we return to this theme in the recommendations.

Reporting methods

Aside from the problem of identifying child abduction incidents in the crimes recorded by the police, it should be noted that the information on these offences reported annually by the Home Office is very limited. Essentially, *Crime in England and Wales* provides a simple count of crimes recorded in each category (e.g. child abduction, etc.), which at best allows a comparison with previous years' figures to examine trends over time.

Whilst the offence of child abduction is split between parental abductions and non-parental abductions, the number of crimes recorded by the police in each category is not reported by the Home Office. Only a single count for all child abductions is published. Identifying the proportion of child abductions committed by parents and non-parents would significantly improve our understanding of the problem.

This is underlined by the paper published by the Home Office in 2004 which examined offences of child abduction recorded by all police forces in 2002–2003.

It provided the only detailed account of the types of offences recorded within this crime category and the characteristics of the victims. Some of the findings are summarised below. Unfortunately, it does not appear that there are any plans to repeat this type of analysis to provide regular in-depth information on child abductions.

What do police data tell us about child abduction in the UK?

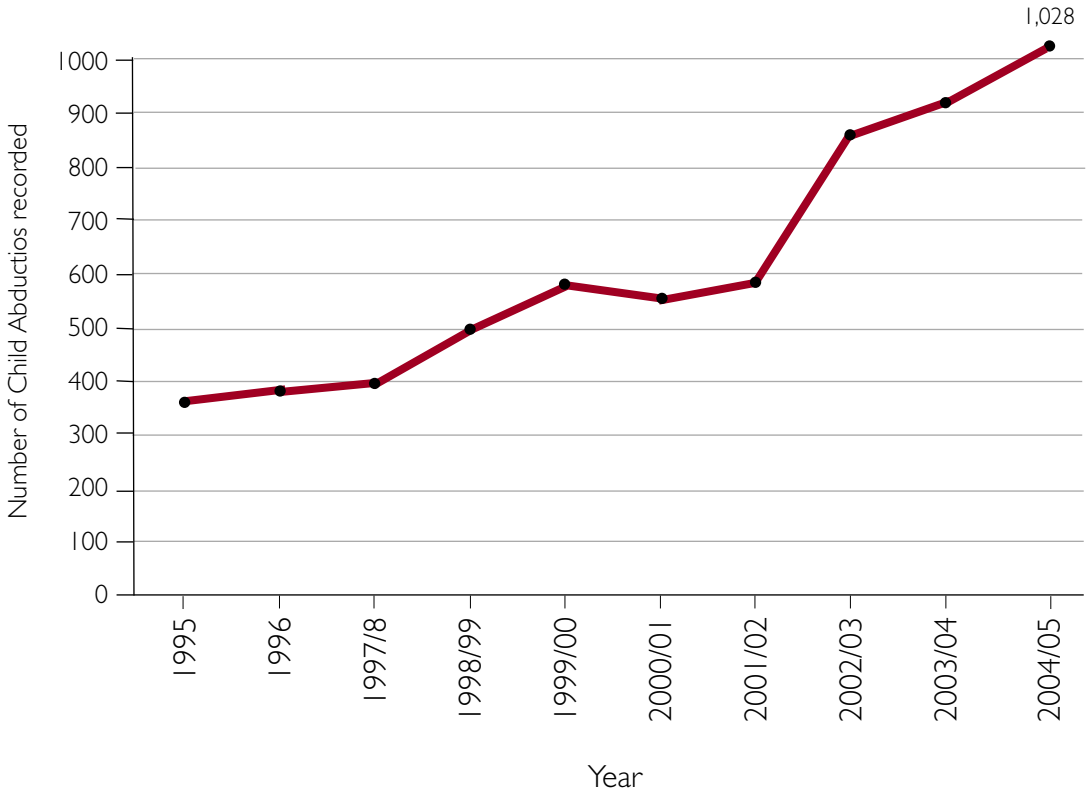
This section summarises what we know about different types of child abduction in the UK, from the studies that have been made.

Figure 15 shows the total number of child abduction offences (both parental and non-parental) recorded each year since 1990 by the police. Even with the recording of such offences restricted in the manner described above, there were over 1,000 offences recorded in 2004/05. There has also been a noticeable increase in the number of offences recorded, particularly over the last five years (more on this at the end of this chapter).

Child abduction statistics, including an exploration of why the offences have gone up so much recently, was the subject of detailed examination by Newiss and Fairbrother (2004). For their study, they collected data from all police forces in England and Wales on child abduction offences recorded in 2002/3. Forces were asked to send details of the victims and the nature of the offence committed. Newiss and Fairbrother were able to analyse 798

Fig. 15 Number of child abduction offences recorded by the police in England and Wales, 1995–2005

Source: Dodd et al *(2004), and* Nicholas *et al (2005), Crime in England and Wales*



offences. From this information, they found that child abduction offences could be broken down as shown in Figure 16.

The 4 main types of offences were:

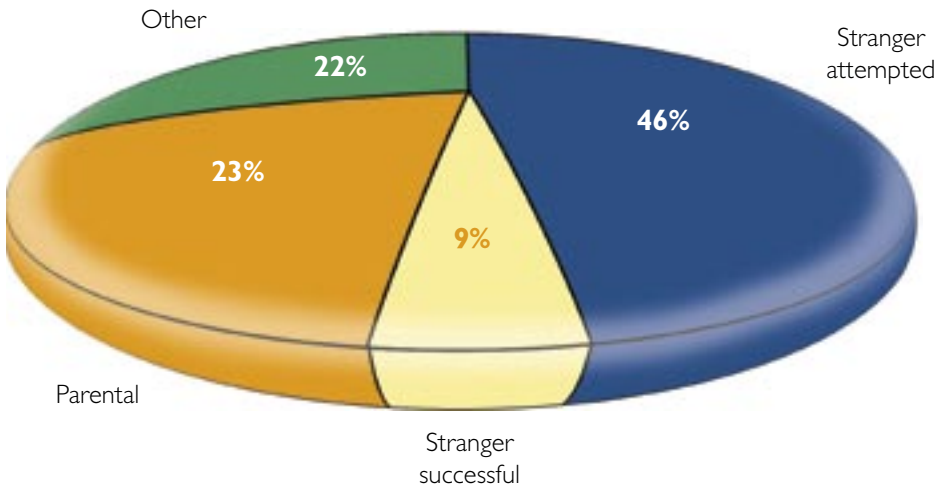
- stranger attempted child abductions – abductions by someone not known to the child which did not result in the successful abduction of the child.
- stranger successful child abductions – abductions by someone not known to the child that succeeded.
- other – successful and attempted abductions of a child by someone with some previous connection to the child.
- parental child abductions – abductions of a child by a natural parent or guardian.

Stranger attempted abductions

The largest single group of child abduction offences recorded by the police in 2002/03 was not actually successful abductions, but attempts committed by strangers (see Figure 16). These commonly involved incidents where a male offender attempted to entice a child into a car or physically to drag a child from a public place. Newiss and Fairbrother could not attribute a motive in the majority of these cases as the contact between offender and victim was fleeting. In only 4% of the cases was there enough information to establish a motive – in all of these cases, it was sexual.

The average age of the victims was older (10 years) than in the parental abduction category and most were female (61%). Given that the overwhelming majority of offenders were male, it seems likely that many of these incidents were also sexually motivated.

Fig. 16 **Type of child abduction offences recorded by police in 2002–2003**
Source: Newiss and Fairbrother (2004)



Given that in these cases the victim was not actually abducted, it seems highly unlikely that any of these children would have been categorised as missing.

Stranger successful abductions

Less than one in ten (9%) child abductions recorded by the police in 2002/03 involved a stranger successfully abducting a child. In these cases the children had a similar age and sex profile to attempted abductions, though a greater proportion were from minority ethnic backgrounds.

Insufficient information was collected to know precisely for how long each child was abducted; two-thirds were recovered within 24 hours, but no information was available on when the other third was recovered. It would seem reasonable that a high proportion of these children would have been considered missing at some point during the incident.

In most cases there was again insufficient detail recorded by the police to establish a motive, though when there was, it was sexual. In a separate study of offenders convicted of child abduction, when the victim and the offender were not related, the motive was overwhelmingly sexual (Erikson and Friendship, 2002).

Other abductions

Newiss and Fairbrother's next abduction category – 'other' – accounted for 22% of all recorded crimes and comprised cases where some form of relationship existed between the victim and the offender aside from parents. These offences took four main forms:

1. ***'Grooming' and exploitative relationships:*** including enticing young people into using alcohol or drugs and possibly becoming involved in prostitution.
2. ***Abductions by other family members, partners or friends***: under the NISMART classification these could often be regarded as family abductions. In England and Wales parental abductions can only be committed by someone with parental responsibility.
3. ***Abductions for revenge/altercation***: emanating from a continuing dispute between the victim and the offender.
4. ***Abductions by boyfriends***: involving the victim going missing with their known boyfriend.

On average the victims were slightly older than in the other groups. Victims were predominantly female and white.

Parental abductions

From Figure 16 it can be seen that in nearly a quarter of child abduction cases recorded by the police (approaching 200 children per year), the child was abducted by a parent. In this category, the children tended to be younger (6 years old on average). A slightly larger percentage of these were males; and

a strikingly high percentage from minority ethnic backgrounds (49%) .

This is hardly surprising since most cases of parental child abduction arise from disputes over custody of and access to children between parents of different nationalities, races, or cultural backgrounds.

The issue of parental child abduction is complex and multifaceted. For example, some parents abduct their children to another country in the hope of reversing custody decisions while others may flee to their home country to rescue their children from domestic violence or abuse.

Newiss and Fairbrother found evidence that in some cases the child had not been removed from the country. It was therefore not possible to confirm how many of these recorded offences were actually child abduction offences according to the legal definition (Article 1 of the *Child Abduction Act* of 1984). These statistics may therefore overestimate the number of legally defined parental child abduction cases. However it is believed that many parents do not report their cases to the police.

As a result, these data sources are not reliable enough to contribute to our understanding of the problem.

Other data sources on parental child abduction

Statistics on certain categories of international parental child abduction are collected by other agencies, including two government departments: the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and the Department for Constitutional Affairs (DCA). But their data do not provide us with much information either.

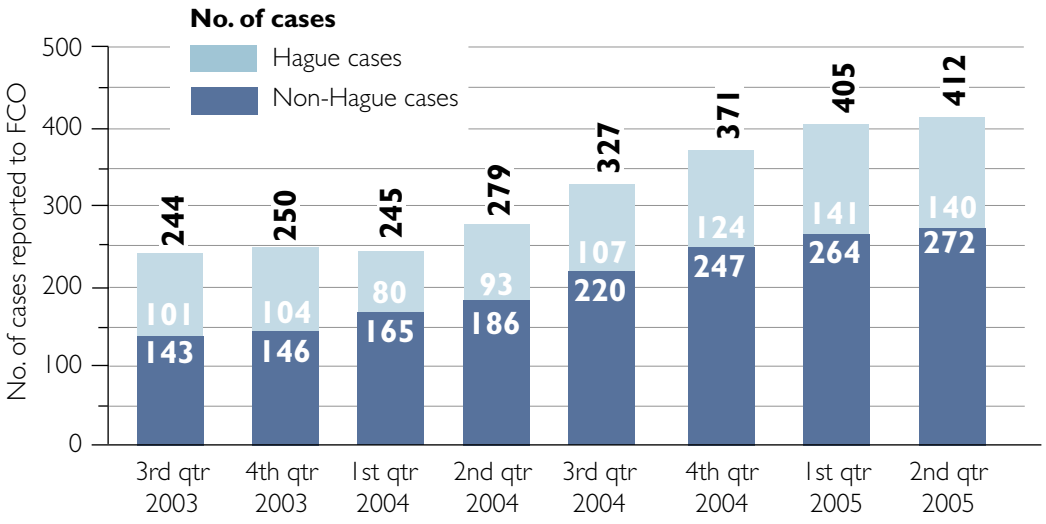
Child Abduction Section, FCO

The Child Abduction Section (CAS) at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office deals with some cases of international parental child abduction to both Hague (see Appendix 2) and non-Hague Convention countries. Prior to the restructuring of the CAS in 2003, no data were collected by the department.

They now make information available on the number of 'active' and 'filed' cases they handle. A case is defined as 'filed' either if it has been resolved, or if the department has no contact with the parent, or if there has been no movement in the case for a period of six months. Figure 17 shows the number of active cases dealt by the CAS since the department started keeping a record.

These rudimentary statistics are of limited use as they do not give us a detailed breakdown (such as, the number, age or sex of the children involved, nor the gender of the abductor). They also do not provide us with enough historical data.

Fig. 17 Number of international parental child abduction cases reported to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2003–2005



A rough estimate given by the department, based on the number of cases they have received so far in 2005, was that around 450 to 500 children had been involved.

International Child Abduction and Contact Unit, DCA

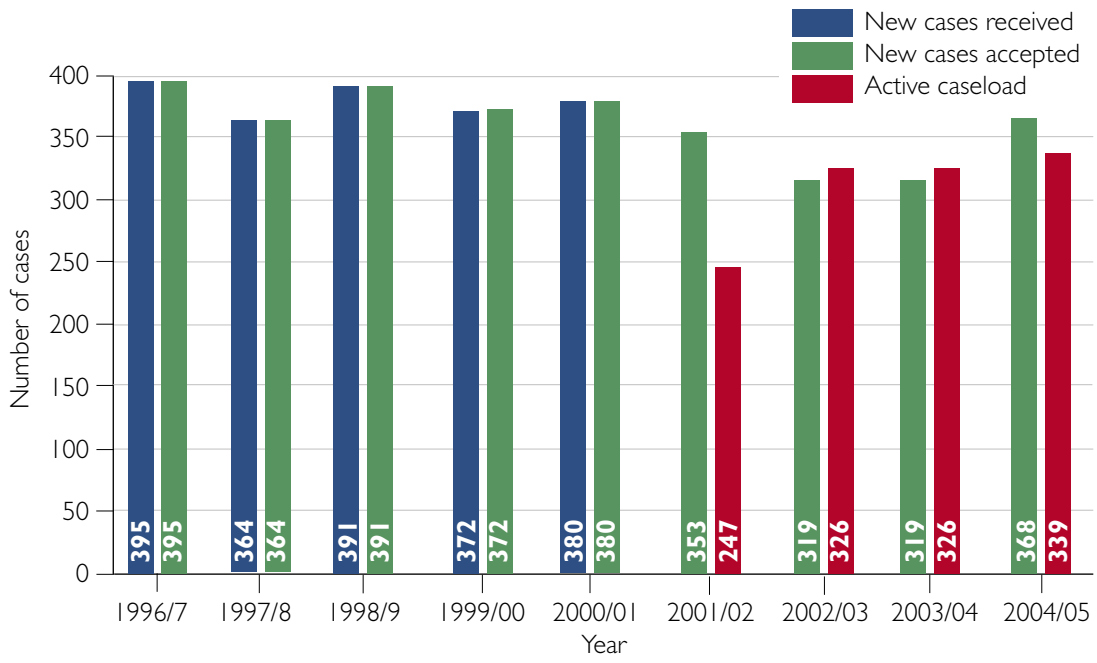
The International Child Abduction and Contact Unit (ICACU) which is based in the office of the Official Solicitor and Public Trustee, acts as the Central Authority for England and Wales for cases of International Child Abduction to Hague Convention signatory countries. In 2004/05, ICACU dealt with 368 Hague cases. Figure 18 shows the number of cases the Department has handled since 1995. Although these statistics provide us with a historical data base, little useful information can be derived as they too do not give us details on how many children were involved, their ages, gender etc. Furthermore, it is not possible to know how many of these cases were included in the CAS' statistics on Hague Convention cases.

A more useful source of information is provided by **reunite***, the centre specialising in international child abduction.

reunite

reunite's statistics suggest that a large number of parental child abductions are neither reported to, nor recorded by, the police. Compared to the 180 children reported to the police in 2002–2003, **reunite** recorded 236 cases of child

Fig. 18 Department for Constitutional Affairs' statistics on Hague Convention case load



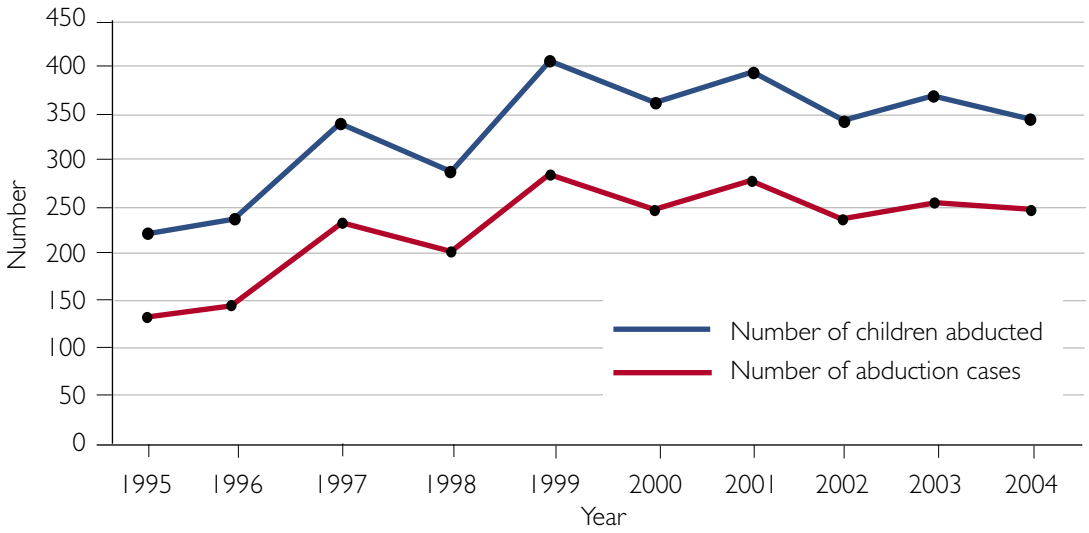
Note: statistics prior to 2001/02 have been rationalised to conform with the new categories

* ***reunite*** *was established in 1986 and was registered as a charity in 1990 to provide advice, information and support to parents, family members and guardians who have had a child abducted or who fear that their child may be abducted (www.reunite.org).*

abduction involving 343 children during that period. But, it must also be noted that many cases will not be reported to **reunite** and that therefore their statistics will not give us a true picture of the problem.

Fig. 19 Number of abduction cases (and children) reported to reunite, 1995–2004

Source: ***reunite***



Note: Abduction figures include non-primary abductions, primary carer abductions and wrongful retentions.

Increase in child abduction offences

By obtaining information from five police forces which had recorded the largest increases in the number of incidents from the previous year, Newiss and Fairbrother were able to identify why the number of recorded offences had increased so dramatically in 2003–2004.

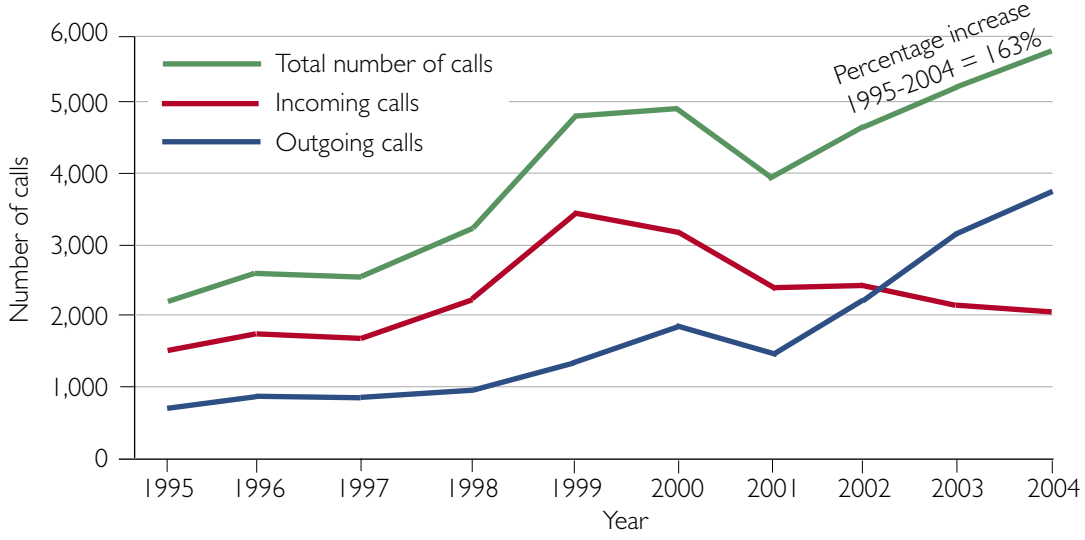
While the actual number of all types of child abduction had increased, there was a disproportionate rise in the number of 'stranger attempted abductions' recorded (nearly 200%). This may have been the result of the introduction of the National Crime Recording Standard (NCRS) at that time. This new approach encourages police forces to record crimes based on the victim's perceptions that a crime has occurred, rather than by applying stricter criteria that require evidence that a crime has taken place.

The move to a more victim-focused approach to crime recording may have also led to the sharp increase (over 60% across the five police forces) in the number of parental child abduction offences being noted – many of which may actually have been outside the scope of the legal definition.

Unfortunately, Newiss and Fairbrother did not have sufficient evidence to determine conclusively what proportion of these increases was attributable to changes in recording practices or to real increases in the number of abductions taking place.

However, an even sharper increase in the number of abduction cases (up 90% from 1995 to 2004) was reported by **reunite** (Figure 19). More significant still was the 163% increase in the number of calls they received during the same period (Figure 20).

Fig. 20 Advice Line – incoming/outgoing calls 1995-2004
Source: ***reunite***



International comparisons

Based on the current information available, it is well nigh impossible to estimate the number of children who are abducted by a family member every year from or within the United Kingdom. First, the police only record cases which fall into the category of Section 1 of the *Child Abduction Act,* which means that only international child abduction will be accounted for in their data.

Second, at the time of writing, no comprehensive studies have been published to examine and compare the full data sources held by **reunite**, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office or the Department for Constitutional Affairs. This is a missed opportunity substantially to increase our knowledge.

By contrast, in the USA, there has been an extensive number of studies to understand better the challenges that these types of cases present. They have provided a mine of information on the nature and characteristics of parental child abduction, as well as offering recommendations and solutions on how to deal with them.

NISMART 2 estimated that a total of 203,900 children were abducted by family members in the US in 1999. This is the equivalent to an annual rate of 2.9 children per 1,000 of the total child population. If one were to apply the same rate to this country, the total number of children abducted by family members could well be in the region of 39,000 per year.

It should be said however, that the NISMART 2 estimates cover a very diverse range of abduction incidents including many cases where the child was lawfully with the perpetrator when the episode started, and many cases where the child was returned soon after the abduction.

It is interesting to note that whilst NISMART 2 estimated that a total of 203,900 children were victims of family abduction, only 117,200 (i.e. 57%) were considered as 'caretaker missing' (i.e. the parent/caretaker did not know the whereabouts of the child, became alarmed for at least one hour, and looked for the child) and only 56,500 had been 'reported' as missing to the police or a missing children's agency (see Table 6, page 80). This would confirm the assumption that many left-behind parents do not report their child as missing to the police (see page 74) and that police data do not give us a good enough indication of the extent of the problem

Apart from the very comprehensive NISMART reports, a multitude of studies focusing on family abductions has been published. For example, Chiancone *et al (*2001) offered an extended analysis of the characteristics of international abduction cases. Grasso *et al* (2001) conducted a major national survey (involving 400 prosecutors' offices; 4,505 country law enforcement agencies, and 3,625 municipal law enforcement agencies) which provided an insight into how the criminal justice

system intervenes in cases of parental child abduction across jurisdictions. Most of the studies were sponsored by the Justice Department.

National surveys like these have never been conducted in this country. The Department of Constitutional Affairs has rarely sponsored in-depth research. Their own method of recording (as discussed above) has at best been broad-brush, and as a result, may not only underestimate the scale of the problem, but also not bring the necessary coordinated response to tackle it

Table 6 Estimates of family abducted children in the USA

Source: *National Estimates of Missing Children: An Overview,* Sedlak, Finkelhor, Hammer and Schiltuz, NISMART, 2002

Category	Estimated number	(95% Confidence Interval)*	Percent
All family abductions	**203,900**	(151,700–256,100)	100
Caretaker missing†	**117,200**	(79,000–155,400)	57
Reported missing‡	**56,500**	(22,600–90,400)	28

Note: All estimates are rounded to the nearest 100.

* The 95-percent confidence interval indicates that if the study were repeated 100 times, 95 of the replications would produce estimates within the ranges noted.

† Whereabouts unknown to caretaker, caretaker alarmed and tried to locate child. Includes reported missing cases.

‡ Reported to police or a missing children's agency for purposes of locating the child. This is a subset of caretaker missing cases.

According to NISMART 2, the 43% who did not contact the police gave the following reasons for not doing so:

- *They resolved the problem alone (23%)*
- *Thought that the police could not help (15%)*
- *Knew the child's location (10%)*

Conclusions

Such evidence as exists points to a steady increase both in child abduction and parental child abduction since the mid-1990s. But the failure to establish precisely the scale of the problem has led to a situation in which this issue is not being tackled adequately. The evidence from the US suggests that once the authorities and law enforcement agencies began to focus on parental child abduction, the incidence of cases started to fall. (NISMART 1 estimated that 354,100 children had been abducted by family members in 1988 compared to 203,900 in 1999, NISMART 2).

In the UK, we need to make a similar effort to eradicate a phenomenon which causes immense suffering to child victims and left-behind parents alike. This means: a re-categorisation of crime and other statistics so that different types of child abduction can be readily identified; closer cooperation between government, police, and NGOs on a national basis; and the drawing up of a national strategy, which is not afraid to draw on best practice in countries like the US where policy, training, and the collection and analysis of data are more advanced than in the UK.

This is one of PACT's top priorities.

Chapter 6
Summary and Recommendations

This report underlines the complexity of the problem of missing children. It has reviewed the extent to which reliable and useful data are available to policymakers and practitioners on the different ways in which young people can go missing. In the process we have sought to provide a brief summary of the characteristics of children going missing within each typology.

Above all else, this report indicates that access to quality data on the problem of children going missing in the UK is patchy. Specific types of missing children, in particular runaways and thrownaways, have been the subject of sustained and concerted research enquiry using reliable and valid scientific methods. The result has been a wealth of information on the nature of the problem.

In contrast, little data are available specifically on the nature and the extent of missing involuntary, lost or injured episodes, or disappearances arising through benign explanations. Some of these incidents will certainly be brought to the attention of the police, but as such they remain part of a much wider population of all missing children reported to the police. Without the ability to differentiate between the various types of missing children, analysis of police records will continue to aggregate and blur their characteristics and the circumstances of their disappearances.

There is also good reason to assume that the number of cases of children reported missing to the police is a considerable underestimate of the true scale of the problem. For example, using a restrictive definition, school surveys have estimated 129,000 incidents per annum of children aged under 16 who have run away or been thrown away overnight. This compares to police estimates of 100,000 incidents per annum, regardless of the age of the child, the type of disappearance, or for how long the child remained missing.

It is difficult to know what proportion of all abductions in the UK is included within the numbers of children recorded as missing by the police. Much probably depends on the level of information available to the police at the initial stages in their enquiries as to the circumstances surrounding the disappearance.

Without the ability to identify abduction cases from reports of missing children made to the police, and in the absence of 'self-report' or parental surveys, PACT's Research Team turned to crimes recorded by the police as child abductions, published annually by the Home Office. Unfortunately,

the restrictive legal definition of this offence, alongside Home Office regulations on police recording practices, again makes this a poor source of data for understanding the full nature and extent of abduction in the UK. More data are available specifically on parental or other familial abductions through various agencies dealing with this problem, although these sources have not so far been fully exploited.

Finally, it remains extremely difficult to provide a credible estimate of the total number of children who go missing each year when data are collected without central coordination or uniform criteria. It is often impossible to tell what, if any overlap there might be between different studies. To compound the problem, some of these studies have been conducted over different time periods. The production of reliable estimates, based on aggregated data from all sources, is far from being the rigorous process it should be.

Recommendations

PACT's report leads to the unavoidable conclusion that in the UK, policies to tackle the problem of missing children are wholly unsatisfactory and require urgent remedy.

The starting point for devising new and effective polices is clarity about the scale and nature of the problem. For that there needs to be a comprehensive, detailed, and accurate statistical base for the UK as a whole.

This will require the drawing up of a national strategy to include the laying down of clear definitions and guidelines; the collection and dissemination of annual statistics; and the cooperation and coordination of government departments, police, and other agencies.

In other words, we recommend:

1. **A new division of the Home Office should be created to drive policy, collate information on the basis of clear and nationally agreed definitions, and set guidelines to ensure that the police and other agencies work together fully and effectively. Alternatively, a national agency equivalent to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Center (NCMEC) should be established to take on this role.**

2. **The creation of a centrally coordinated national programme of research, drawing on the experience of NISMART, to produce scientifically reliable estimates of the total missing children population in the UK and component types within.**

   We believe that improving the quality of information on missing children can be achieved using a twin track approach. Both should be an integral part of the coordinated national programme of research.

   The first track would require the planning, funding and commissioning of new research designed specifically to provide reliable estimates and in-depth knowledge of all types of missing children. This would most likely involve periodically conducting bespoke surveys of representative samples of both children and parents.

   The second track would set out to collate and analyse information on missing children to be published on a regular basis. Our report has highlighted a number

of opportunities for collating and improving the data from existing sources. In particular:

a) **The Home Office and ACPO should require all police forces to submit an annual return of the number of reports of missing persons they receive, including the number of children involved.**

Reports made to the police do not provide an exhaustive account of the types and overall number of children who have gone missing. However, they are one of the few sources of data that could easily be accessed on a regular basis. Annual returns would provide an estimate of the overall number of missing children and they would permit a simple analysis of yearly trends.

b) **ACPO should encourage all police forces to use a standardised electronic reporting form using common definitions.**

The use of a standardised electronic reporting form would provide comparable data between different police forces. This would facilitate the national analysis of different types of missing children to a level of detail not currently possible.

PACT's report shows that even though there is some consensus over the number of reports of missing children made to the police each year, it has so far been impossible to calculate how many individual children are involved in these incidents. Computerisation of missing episodes would help in this respect. ACPO should consider requesting that forces developing new software to record missing persons do so with some function to link incidents to individuals. This would provide an invaluable source of information to future researchers.

c) **ACPO and the Home Office should ensure that all police forces comply with the requirement to send to the the Police National Missing Persons Bureau (PNMPB) all cases of children who have been missing for more than 14 days (as well as those for whom particular concern is raised before this period of time).**

PNMPB acts as the police central clearing house for information on missing persons. We believe that the PNMPB is the natural place for the collection of information on missing children's cases. It is a specialist intelligence unit which

focuses on missing persons and has contacts with most government departments as well as the primary NGOs and charities that deal with missing persons. Full national compliance – with all police forces sending cases to the PNMPB – would create a central repository of missing children's cases, serving individual investigations and providing a valuable source of data with which to improve our understanding of the phenomenon.

The role of the PNMPB has been revised by the *Guidance on the Management, Recording and Investigation of Missing Persons* (2005) to include management of the Missingkids Website (see Appendix 1, page 89). The use of the Missingkids Website will not only help the police locate missing children, but it would also provide an invaluable source of information and an historical record on individual cases which would benefit future police investigations.

d) **The Home Office should publish separate counts of the number of parental and non-parental child abductions in their statistical series.**

Changes to the way the Home Office publish information on abductions, including a simple split between parental and non-parental abductions would make available more specific information.

e) **Data on overseas parental abductions held by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Department for Constitutional Affairs, and other agencies, such as reunite, should be made available for routine analysis.**

All our recommendations form part of what PACT believes is a vision for the future of data provision on missing children in the UK.

Appendix 1

The Missingkids Website

Modern technology offers us unprecedented tools to help find missing and abducted children.

Originally created by the US-based National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC), the Missingkids website is a unique, state-of-the-art, searchable data-base, which provides a single repository of help and hope for endangered children at home and around the world.

It enables police forces instantly to disseminate to colleagues at home and abroad photographs of, and information on, missing children and the adults known to be with them when they disappeared.

To date, the Missingkids Website is operational in 16 countries.

The website was introduced to England, Wales and Northern Ireland in June 2000,

and to Scotland in June 2004 in a partnership between PACT, ACPO, ACPOS, the Home Office, CA, and ICMEC. It is managed by the Police National Missing Persons Bureau (PNMPB) and by a number of police forces.

It is a remarkable collaboration between the Police, NGOs, and the private sector to bring our children home.

PACT actively promotes this web-site to help the police locate and retrieve missing and abducted children. We also believe that once all police forces actively use this site to input their cases, this will provide us with a remarkably useful data sources on a specific category of missing children.

Appendix 2

Child Rescue Alert

The Child Rescue Alert is as a ground-breaking initiative to save abducted children from being murdered.

The scheme is based on an American concept called Amber Alert, which was introduced in Texas in 1996 following the kidnapping and brutal murder of 9-year old Amber Hagerman in Arlington, Texas. Her tragic death had such a profound impact on her community that it prompted local police forces and broadcasters to develop the AMBER (America's Missing Broadcast Emergency Response) plan.

The plan is simple: as soon as a child is abducted and is thought to be at risk of serious harm or death, police forces alert radio and television stations. They, in turn, interrupt their programmes to broadcast information about the missing child using the Emergency Alert System (EAS), which is typically used for warning the public of severe weather emergencies.

In 2003, the *Protect Act* formally established the federal government's role in the Amber Alert system. As a result, most States in America have now developed their own version of AMBER and more than 200 children have been rescued.

In November 2002, the Sussex Police launched their own version of AMBER, which they called 'Child Rescue Alert' It was soon rolled out nationally and is now part of the police '*Guidance on the Management, Recording and Investigation of Missing Persons*'.

An Alert is activated only when it is feared that the abducted child (under 16 years old) is in imminent danger of serious

Mr and Mrs Dowler, the parents of missing school girl, Millie Dowler, with Chief Constable Denis O'Connor at the launch of Child Rescue Alert in Surrey.

harm or death and that there is sufficient information to enable the public to assist the police in finding the child.

Child Rescue Alert has the added value of sending a strong message that crimes against children will not go unpunished and that the police, broadcasters, NGOs, and the public will work together to apprehend predators.

Appendix 3

The Hague Convention of 25 October 1980 on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction

The purpose of the Convention is to discourage parental child abduction and to ensure '*the protection of children from the harmful effects of their wrongful removal or retention across international boundaries*'.

The Convention is meant to provide a simple and straightforward procedure available to parents who are seeking the return of their child/ren to their country of habitual residence. Should one parent break a custody agreement either by illegally retaining (usually on an access visit) or by abducting a child, the Hague Convention requires the child's 'prompt' return to the country where the original custody agreement was made. The Convention can also help parents exercise visitation rights abroad.

Save in exceptional circumstances, the Convention is based on the assumption that it is in the child's best interests to be returned quickly, and that any further decisions about the care and welfare of the child are best made in his or her country of habitual residence. This ensures that the abducting parent cannot profit by choosing one jurisdiction over another ('forum shopping') in the hope of reversing previous custody decisions.

However, there are some exceptions:

- First, the obligation to return an abducted child only applies if the child is under 16-years old and if the application is made within one year of the wrongful removal or retention. If the application is made after one year, the court may use its discretion and refuse a return.

Moreover, a court may refuse to order a return if:

- The child would be exposed to a 'grave risk of physical or psychological harm' or put 'in an intolerable situation' if sent home.
- The child 'objects to being returned' and is old and mature enough to have his or her views taken into account. (The treaty does not establish at what age children reach this level of maturity).
- The left-behind parent was not exercising rights of custody or that he or she consented or acquiesced to the removal or retention.

The Convention first came to force in 1986. Today 75 countries are party to it, testimony to its success in improving the likelihood and speed of return of abducted or wrongfully retained children to their country of habitual residence. In addition, the reputation of the Hague Convention has meant that some abducting or retaining parent have returned the child voluntarily before the threat of Hague proceedings.

But the Hague Convention does not always work as effectively as it should, as it inconsistently interpreted and enforced. Different national approaches; slow procedures and lack of enforcement mechanisms in some countries; and various interpretations of the exceptions have meant that too many cases of international child abduction remain unresolved.

One of PACT's goals has been to improve the workings of the Hague Convention and to raise awareness of the long-term effect of abduction on children. For more information, please refer to: www.pact-online.org.

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The disappearance of a child, even for a relatively short time, can cause enormous distress to parents and other carers. The time and money spent by the police, social services, charities and other organisations in trying to find or help missing children is considerable. The scale of the problem – *every five minutes* a child is reported missing in the UK -– alongside the human and social cost, makes missing children one of the most urgent social issues of our time.

If practitioners and policy makers are to respond effectively, it is essential that they have at their disposal data that provide as complete and accurate an understanding of the nature and extent of the problem as possible. This report by Parents and Abducted Children Together (PACT), provides an important and often critical account of the information that is currently available in the UK, alongside a summary of what we know about children going missing. *Every 5 Minutes* should herald a watershed in the UK's determination to collect the information so vitally needed in order to protect properly our own children.

Cherie Booth, QC
Patron of PACT