



# Understanding and Managing Risk in the Context of Missing Persons

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A decision-making guide to help assess the risk and urgency of a missing person case

Includes: Missing Persons Risk Assessment Checklists



The European Child Rescue Alert &  
Police Network on Missing Children  
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# Preface

When a person goes missing it is essential that the circumstances be properly evaluated to determine the correct response. Under-reaction can result in serious harm or death to the missing person. Over-reaction and doing too much is wasteful of resources and potentially an unwarranted intrusion on an individual's privacy. Given the large number of missing person reports that are made to the police, this is not a simple task and it is all too easy to make mistakes, some of which become well-known in the media.

Over the years, different types of classification of missing person have been devised, with different models for assessing the risk in an attempt to be able to respond to these reports in the most effective way possible. This has also shown the difficulties in developing such models and how to define the level of risk. That said, there has been a reasonable amount of consistency in relation to the risk factors that have evolved but little has been done to describe what those factors mean and what their impact is. The purpose of this document is to address those issues and discuss how risk assessment works, together with a description of the risk factors and what they mean.

The other gap that exists is in the lack of training in relation to missing person risk assessment and, for that matter, in the investigation of missing persons. Written documents provide the basis for improved understanding but it is only through appropriate training that the subject is fully understood and given the level of importance that it deserves. It is therefore the intention that this document will form the basis of practitioner training.

The document is primarily aimed at practitioners, in the hope that it will enable them to have a better understanding of the process of risk assessment. It is also of relevance to managers, who will be responsible for implementing correct processes and identifying training needs to ensure that missing persons are properly dealt with.

While the responsibility for investigation and immediate safeguarding concerns rests with the police, other agencies have an important role to play and should work in collaboration with the police. In order for the circumstances and risk relating to an individual's disappearance to be properly understood, all relevant agencies are likely to have a part to play and should not stand back from this. Effective safeguarding will only happen if all agencies work together and share relevant information. The document is of relevance to all such agencies, for example, health, social services, education and relevant NGOs. If the way in which risk is assessed is consistent across all agencies, there is a better chance of responding effectively and consistently to those who go missing.

It is important to note that, while we currently have the best model we can, it does not provide specific indicators of risk. This document is intended to guide an investigator's thought process to enable them to reach a reasonable judgement about the risk of harm present in any missing person case. More work is required to develop better ways of making these assessments.

## About Charlie Hedges

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Missing Children Police Expert Group Coordinator

**Profile:** Charlie Hedges is a renowned UK specialist in the field of missing children. He is responsible for the Police Expert Group and provides specialist support and training in the area of missing children. Working at the UK Police force for over 30 years, he has helped to shape policy and strategy in this area. Mr Hedges has worked for the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP), the UK National Crime Agency (NCA), and the UK Police Forces.

## About AMBER Alert Europe: The European Child Rescue Alert & Police Network on Missing Children

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Dedicated to the protection of missing children, AMBER Alert Europe connects law enforcement with citizens when the police believe the public can help save the child's life. It also provides for training and cross-border coordination to law enforcement on missing children.

AMBER Alert Europe is an international not for profit organisation with 23 members (law enforcement, ministries & NGOs) in 16 countries. Its Police Network consists of over 35 experts representing law enforcement from 14 EU countries. The goals of AMBER Alert Europe are backed by 465 Members of the European Parliament.

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# 01

## Introduction

# Introduction

**An early assessment of a missing person report to determine the urgency of the investigation is critical. This can be compared to the triage used in assessing casualties and the speed of response needed to save lives. Core to this process is assessing the level of risk to the missing person and how immediate that risk is. The assessment and categorisation of risk and the particular circumstances of the case should shape the response, informing the investigative and search strategies. Risk should also be regularly reviewed to consider new information and evolving circumstances.**

Making such an assessment of risk in relation to missing persons is often difficult, as only partial information may be known. Much depends on the judgement of the person trying to determine the risk and the skills and experience possessed by those people is widely varied. Risk factors have been identified over the years and are used as indicators that could guide decision-makers. However, those decision-makers are given little or no training in this type of risk assessment whilst being expected to be able to know what the various factors mean and how they should be interpreted.

Various documents have been written on risk relating to missing persons but little has been done to describe the individual factors that cause a person to go missing and therefore contribute to risk. This document is an attempt to put that right. It draws on existing research and the professional experience of law enforcement specialists in the field of missing persons. The process of risk assessment is discussed and the criteria are described in the hope that this will give a better understanding of what they mean. The document is also intended for use as the basis for police training to raise awareness and knowledge.

The risk factors used have evolved over many years and are drawn from the professional experience of specialists involved in missing person investigations and give a common-sense background to the process of making an assessment but are not specific risk indicators.



# 02

## Assessing risk

# Assessing risk

The level of risk to which a missing person is exposed must be understood and can be done by assessing their **personal circumstances and the environment to which they are exposed**. The two combined will indicate how significant the risk is.



Risk assessment is broadly thought of as clinical or actuarial assessment. Clinical risk assessment is based on the specialist or experiential knowledge of experts and practitioners. It is suggested that what happens in missing person cases is closest to a clinical assessment.

Unlike clinical assessment, actuarial assessment tries to bring statistical probability to bear on the decision-making. This requires data to be made available on the power of individual risk factors – or combinations of risk factors – to predict the likelihood of specific harmful outcomes. Attempts at developing such measures are very much in their infancy.

In the UK in the early 2000s an attempt was made to produce a missing persons risk scoring system, which effectively weighted different risk factors to produce a risk classification. Unfortunately this proved unsuccessful. Tarling and Burrows (2003) – who reviewed the system - concluded '(...) it is over optimistic to expect to be able to create a finely tuned, interval scaled score, which accurately estimates small gradations in risk'.

That the same authors went further to say 'given the inevitable limitations of any risk prediction score, the police will always be required to exercise a good deal of professional judgement in missing person cases, albeit informed by any available and usable empirical evidence on the risks of different outcomes'. (Tarling and Burrows 2003)

# 03

**Tools to assist the  
investigator**

# Tools to assist the investigator

It may be useful to think of the risk factors outlined in this document as **a decision-making guide to help form an opinion about the risk and therefore the urgency.** In order to guide those taking missing person reports, there are example checklists at Appendixes 1&2 that can be used by the police should they wish to do so. Appendix 1 contains a document to enable someone taking the first call to the police about a missing person, or the first police officer responding to that call and making an initial triage of the risk, to determine the urgency of the response. Appendix 2 contains a more detailed guide for investigators to follow, that reminds officers of questions that can be asked to assist in making a more informed judgement on the risk. The checklists are compiled primarily from examples used in the UK, The Netherlands, Australia and the USA.



# 04

**Key principles of risk  
triage**

# Key principles of risk triage

**Likelihood and outcomes** - Risk should be considered in relation to likelihood and outcomes. 'Both the seriousness of outcomes, and the likelihood of them happening must be considered' (Carson and Bain 2008). This means that no matter how serious the concern, if there is little or no likelihood of it happening, the risk is low.

**Risk changes over time** - Recognising that risk is constantly changing is also critical, with the passage of time, the discovery of new information or changing circumstances all having an influence that can increase or decrease risk. A review process must therefore be in place to monitor this and make adjustments as required.

**Risk assessment** – This is the process by which we evaluate the factors or circumstances of a disappearance to arrive at an appropriate category or classification of risk.

**Risk classification** – A variety of different labels are given to the outcomes of a risk assessment, such as, high, medium, low, urgent or worrying. These are intended to give an order of priority to investigations and may also be accompanied by a definition of what responses or outcomes are expected. This can assist in the triage process but should not constrain the response and make it inflexible.

**Risk factors** – These are individual factors about the missing person or the circumstances that might indicate risk. Little has previously been done to describe what these factors mean. It is also unlikely that any training will have been delivered that teaches police officers to conduct risk assessments on missing persons. Having a better understanding of risk and what causes it should lead to a more consistent response.

*Risk factors should be based upon quality empirical research, wherever that has been undertaken. But where that is not available, risk factors may be based upon practitioners' experience.*  
(Carson and Bain 2008)

**Consistent risk assessments** – Where other agencies are involved with a person, for example, a child being looked after by social services, there should be consistency between agencies when assessing risk. It is too often seen that different agencies will assess risk to a missing person based on different criteria. In some cases, the severity of risk is given the same label but is based on entirely different criteria and responded to in different ways.

**Risk management** – This is the process by which risk assessment is implemented through attitudes to risk and harm in missing person cases, investigative and prevention strategies, escalation of response, review, training and so forth. Understanding risk should inform action and sharpen decision making through risk management.

*However, although most police officers will have experience of dealing with reports of missing persons, their expertise in assessing the risks faced by them is open to debate. In many cases, the police are limited by the availability of information and other demands on their time. (Newiss 2004)*

Poor risk management can result from, bad attitudes, a failure to properly assess the quality of information or to recognise gaps in knowledge and not seeking to redress this.

*Poor risk assessment can lead to harm, inquiries and litigation. Good risk management, because it comes after the assessment, could prevent a poor risk assessment from causing harm. (Carson and Bain 2008)*

*Despite risk assessment being a crucial facet within a missing person investigation the capacity to respond and meaningfully risk assess every case of missing children was hampered by high volume of reports and out of hours activity when few professionals are available. (Hayden and Goodship 2013)*



# 05

**Patterns of behaviour and  
indicators**

# Patterns of behaviour and indicators

In the majority of cases, it is the reasons for going missing that create a significant proportion of the risk. Those reasons may still be present whether the person is missing or not. Too often, risk is only considered in relation to individual cases e.g. the report of a missing person. It is important that risk is considered in relation to any continuing patterns of behaviour or harm. If the underlying causes for the person to go missing are known, risk can be seen as a continuum, not as isolated incidents.

For example, if the reason the person has disappeared is to escape abuse at home, bullying at school or domestic violence, the risk does not just relate to the period when they are missing and, in some cases, the risk could be greater when they return. Also, the risks will be different when they are at home and when they are away, which also reinforces the fact that risk is not consistent and this changes with the passage of time and variations in circumstances.



# 06

## Risk and the investigative process

# Risk and the investigative process

Assessing risk should be seen as integral to the investigation into the disappearance of a person and will indicate the seriousness and urgency of the case.

**Initial assessment** - The initial assessment of risk will inform the response by identifying the issues that need to be dealt with and the type of searches and enquiries that are likely to locate the person. It will also indicate the urgency that should be applied to locating the person and therefore the type of resources to be used and how many. Information arising from the investigation will further enhance the understanding of the risk a missing person is exposed to.

**Changing risk** – As the investigation proceeds and new information becomes available, the understanding of the level of risk may change. This should not interfere with the actual assessment and classification of risk, unless there is a material change in the understanding of the likelihood of harm having befallen the missing person. The response may therefore vary as circumstances change, or new information becomes known but this should not be based on operational convenience.

**Quality of information** – In any investigation, the quality of the information gathered is critical and should be considered for its accuracy and the reliability of the source. Too often, due to a lack of time and for other reasons, available information is collected without any assessment and far-reaching conclusions are drawn from, or based on it. Information given by people who know the missing person should be asked follow-up questions to determine the source of the information provided, for example, is a reference to the person having depression an opinion or is it based on an expert diagnosis?

It can be beneficial to consider the following:

- Is the information a fact?
- What does it mean?
- What are its consequences?



**07**

**Attitudes and  
pre-conceptions**

# Attitudes and pre-conceptions

Making an assessment of what has happened to a missing person and the risk that is associated with their disappearance is subjective and can be coloured by the investigator's thinking. It is important that each case is treated on its own merit, as is each incident of the same person going missing on multiple occasions. Research has identified the following issues that support the arguments made about attitudes.

*(...) anecdotal evidence suggests that some officers develop stereotypes of the missing persons that they encounter most often; for example, young people who run away from children's homes are viewed as 'streetwise' and unlikely to come to harm when in fact these children may be at particular risk of abuse. (Tong, Massey and Alys 2013)*

*More research is therefore required, and police officers and staff require training on how to recognise biases in their thinking and identify, evaluate, and apply relevant literature to support their decision making and risk assessment. (Tong, Massey and Alys 2013)*

While this research is based on the police in the UK, experience of working in other countries indicates that such attitudes are not unique.

It is important to remember that young people do not fully mature until they are adults which is why most legislation classifies a child as someone under 18 years of age. Some children are more accustomed to being on the streets than others and some may have attitudes that suggest they are more mature than is the case. There is no specific level of ability linked to a specific age for all children as they all mature at different rates. A child thinking that they are an adult and getting involved in risky situations or with risky people without understanding the consequences can compound risk. That is what paedophiles and abusers recognize and prey on when looking for their victims.

The frequency of going missing is also misinterpreted as a reducing level of risk. However, the opposite can apply due to the individual taking greater risks and engaging in more risky situations. This can be because they do not have the maturity to recognize what they are getting involved in or are actively seeking attention and love because those things are missing from their lives. Cases where there are repeated incidents of going missing can be frustrating and time consuming but the answer lies in early intervention and prevention, rather than dismissing it all as a waste of time. Consideration should also be given to working with other agencies and NGOs to tackle these issues.

*(...) that there is a very significant positive relationship between the number of times someone goes missing to the average harm associated with that person (both as victim and suspect). (Vo 2015)*



# 08

**Actual harm suffered**

## Actual harm suffered

Identifying harm suffered while missing is challenging, as only the missing person knows what has happened to them. For them to reveal that information can be difficult and may only happen when a trusting relationship has been formed with another person. It can take a significant amount of time to build that trust, especially if they have been subject to an abusive relationship as it is often symptomatic of such relationships to be wary of other people.

Official records of harm suffered are mainly based on what the victims are willing to reveal, together with police crime and incident reports but these are not always linked to missing person reports. Having an effective return home interview process is most likely to give a more comprehensive picture of what happens to missing people and the harm they suffer.

Harms needs to be recorded more accurately and consistently if police are to seriously look at how best to prevent and reduce harm. At present, the harm is not recorded clearly in a missing person report either as suspect or victim. (Vo 2015)

It is probable that the risks are greater than those recorded, according to substantial new evidence:

- 'Around one in nine (11%) young people said that they had been hurt or harmed while away from home on the only or most recent occasion.' (The Children's Society 2011)
- 'One in six (18%) young people said that they had slept rough or stayed with someone they just met for at least some of the time they were away. It was most common for young people to stay with friends (45%) followed by relatives (36%).' (The Children's Society 2011)
- 'Almost one in eight (12%) of young people said that they had stolen in order to survive while away and one in eleven (9%) said that they had begged. In addition, one in nine said that they had done 'other things' in order to survive. For ethical reasons, it was not possible to ask young people for further details about this. There was substantial overlap in risky survival strategies and in total around one in five (20%) of young people had resorted to at least one of these three survival strategies while away.' (The Children's Society 2011).

The UK Missing Persons Bureau Missing Persons Data Report 2014/15 states that of missing children reported to the police, 1.6% were hurt or harmed and 0.3% was a victim of a sexual offence.

*According to the data reported missing adults are significantly more likely to come to some form of harm, including being found dead, than missing children; whereas missing children are more likely to be victims of a sexual offence than missing adults. (National Crime Agency 2016)*

All of the above makes clear that risks involved when a person goes missing are not always understood and are likely to be hidden. Some of the most likely causes of harm are discussed below.

## Psychological

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This type of harm is not easy to recognise, but when considering the reasons why a person has left their normal place of residence, the insecurity of being away and things that may happen to them can result in the potential for them to suffer this type of harm.

## Physical

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Actual physical harm can result from actions of a third party, e.g., assault or through the circumstances of being away, such as lack of nourishment or medication, adverse weather, or no means of shelter.

## Family separation

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The harms associated with family issues can be considered in four areas:

1. It may be a family problem that led to the decision to leave and that in itself is harmful.
2. Being away from family and friends can lead to feelings of insecurity and concern. It can result in risk taking in absence of adult guidance.
3. Concerns about how other family members may have reacted to going missing inhibit the ability to return home plus any effect on family relations.
4. The impact of family abduction and the risk from the family member whilst away.

## Distorted perspectives

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What is considered 'normal' in terms of behaviour can become distorted by issues resulting from the need to survive or from accepting different standards through habitual activities. Examples include exchanging sex for needs such as food or shelter, or constant exposure to criminal behaviour, both of which appear to be the norm and acceptable.

Those who exploit the vulnerable often set out to convince them that the authorities are not to be trusted and are not able to help. Also, living in these difficult situations breeds distrust of people, often making it very difficult to reach for or accept help.

### SCENARIO

Mary started going missing when she was 13 years old and was introduced to a man who offered the use of his flat to shelter and to stay overnight. He persuaded her to steal from shops and sleep with him, then to steal for other people as well. She became so accustomed to this behaviour that she thought it was normal. She was happy to commit criminal and sexual acts in return for food and shelter on a regular basis.

## Risk taking habits increase with time and familiarity with risk and harm

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People sometimes take greater risks and what is thought to be normal exists at a lower level of tolerance. This can apply in repeat missing situations where each time they go missing increasingly risky behaviour occurs.

## Offending

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The relationship between going missing and criminal activity has been considered in some studies and indicates that there is a link between the two activities. In terms of their involvement with criminal activity, Shalev's (2011) study shows 'that of the 51 children in the sample, who have been reported missing three or more times during one year, 86% have been arrested at least once, nearly 8 times per person ranging between 1 to 30 arrests'. Mitchell et al (2014) says: 'Approximately 68% of the young people had information recorded on file relating to their involvement in offending behaviour, including, for example, breach of the peace, vandalism, theft and physical assault, although these were generally minor incidents.'

When the basic human needs are not met, the need to survive kicks in and people will do things they would not otherwise consider to stay alive, sometimes known as survival offending. This can be stealing food that is otherwise not available or, in the case of trafficking or sexual exploitation, recruiting others to perform sexual favours for third parties so that the recruiter does not have to do these acts any more. In Shalev's (2001) study, 'an important finding is that shoplifting and theft were common arrests, and may be indicative of the fact that the children may not have other means to support themselves while away, thus committing "survival" crimes.'

This creates significant challenges for law enforcement in determining an individuals' status as victim or offender. At what point should a victim be criminalised because they have been forced to do something that is the only way to survive?

### SCENARIO

Sarah was sexually exploited from the age of 12 years and after a couple of years, in order to reduce the number of occasions when she was expected to have relations with other men and suffer violent sexual activity, she started to recruit other girls to be abused and raped.



# 09

**Decision-making  
guide to risk**

# Decision-making guide to risk

This section lists the most commonly used factors that are used in the assessment of risk relating to missing persons. The list is not exhaustive, but can be used as a checklist (see Appendix 1&2) in support of professional judgement to ensure that relevant questions are asked. These factors do not predict harm and should be used to enable a better understanding of the circumstances that will allow an assessment of risk to be made. The following section describes what each of these factors mean and their relevance to the level of risk.

The list is divided into two parts, personal factors and the environment relating to their circumstances. Taking the two together should lead to an understanding of the risk to which they are likely to be exposed. For example, a person's mental state on its own may not be a serious problem, but combined with bad weather conditions or indications of bullying may raise the risk level.

## Personal

- What type of person are they?
- Has the person's behaviour changed recently?
- Behaviour that is out character is often a strong indicator of risk; are the circumstances of going missing different from normal behaviour patterns?
- Have they been missing before?
- Is the person vulnerable due to age, infirmity or any other factor?
- Does the missing person have any physical illness or mental health problem?
- Do they need essential medication that is not likely to be available to them?
- Drug or alcohol dependency?
- Is there any indication that the person is likely to commit suicide?
- Have they attempted to commit suicide before?
- Belief that the person may not have the ability to interact safely with others or an unknown environment?

## Environment

- Are there any concerns or suspicions about the person making the report or do they appear inappropriate?
- Is the person suspected to be subject of a crime e.g., abduction (parental or criminal), honour related violence or kidnap?
- Are there family or relationship problems or recent history of family conflict and/or abuse?
- Are they the victim or perpetrator of domestic violence?
- Are they on a Child Protection Plan?
- Any indications of bullying or harassment e.g., racial, sexual, homophobic etc?
- Do they have school/college/ university/employment or financial problems?
- Consider if forced marriage or honour based violence are an issue.
- Consider if they might be the victim of sexual exploitation.
- Have they acquired new friends or relationships recently?
- Are the weather conditions likely to pose a risk?
- Other unlisted factors which the officer or supervisor considers should influence risk assessment?



# 10

**An explanation of  
the risk factors**

# An explanation of the risk factors - personal factors

These relate specifically to the individual and their character and may require intrusive questioning to get the full information.

## What type of person are they?

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Understanding their personality, background and experience will assist in understanding the risk. Are they resilient, used to being in unknown environments, capable of looking after themselves or open to ask for help will all be relevant questions.

## Has the person's behaviour changed recently?

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Changes in behaviour can be indicative of underlying issues that could result in the person going missing. This could be a new relationship, discovery of a serious medical condition, financial difficulties and many more. Often the change of behaviour will be linked to one of the factors listed here.

## Have they been missing before?

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Whether this is the first time or one of many occasions, each must be assessed on its merits but consideration should be given to what has happened to them before and where they have been. If it is the first time that someone has gone missing, it should be considered as out of character behaviour, as discussed below, and carefully assessed to determine the circumstances.

It is sometimes thought that someone who goes missing frequently is at a lower risk of harm, often based on the notion that they will return this time simply because they have done so before. The situation is much more complicated than that and risk can increase with the frequency of going missing. This can be because familiarity makes people think they are better at looking after themselves than they really are able to. Also, people will enter into increasingly risky places and situations because they have not previously encountered any harmful outcomes and this may lead them to take more risks. Repeated absences can also be an indicator that they are engaging in other activities that may make them liable to harm. Do not allow the regularity of going missing to create a false sense of reduced risk.

## Behaviour that is out character is often a strong indicator of risk; are the circumstances of going missing different from normal behaviour patterns?

When someone does something unusual, that behaviour should be questioned to consider what has driven that behaviour. Ask the informant, family members, friends etc., why their normal behaviour has changed and what they might have done or forced to do. Out of character behaviour can be one of the strongest indicators of serious risk.

### SCENARIO

Sam always told his mother and father where he was going, what time he would be home and let them know if he was going to be late. He was late home from a party and enquiries with friends indicated that he left to go home and gave no indication of not going there. His behaviour was out of character. It was later found that he had been assaulted and died of his injuries.

## Is the person vulnerable due to age, infirmity or any other factor?

Age should always be considered in the context of the individual characteristics and in combination with other factors. There are some obvious extremes i.e., the very old and the very young, but personal characteristics will have a direct relevance to this. For example, some older people are more fit and capable of looking after themselves than others and children will have reached different stages of maturity at different ages. In many countries, a child is defined as not having attained the age of 18 years but this is lower in some countries.

It is hard to define specific ages where risk increases or decreases and it is suggested that using specific age criteria can be a false threshold of risk. For example, if using a specific age, e.g., 14 years, to define a level of risk, different people will have different abilities at the same age and what happens if they are a day or two over or under that age?

Assessing risk relating to the disappearance of males from the middle teenage years upwards can be problematic and lead to an assumption that they are just young men having a good time. A significant number do suffer significant harm, with a worrying number being found dead in water.

### SCENARIO

Newiss (2011) identified 17 people who went missing in the UK following a night out during 2006 and 2007 who were later found to have died. In all cases where information was available, the person was found dead in water. All were male.

## Does the missing person have any physical illness or mental health problem?

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The nature and severity of the illness will have to be assessed as to its impact on the individual's vulnerability and ability to cope, especially in unknown environments. Ask the person's doctor or other person who may have professional expertise to advise on this.

### SCENARIO

Sandra suffers from Autism, which means that she is unable to deal with situations that are not familiar to her. Social interactions are difficult for her. She became lost while out with her family and, due to these difficulties, she was unable to ask for help and was eventually found suffering from hypothermia.

## Do they need essential medication that is not likely to be available to them?

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There are two factors to be considered here.

1. Firstly, if medication that the person needs is left behind, it may indicate that they had not planned to leave or were considering committing suicide and would no longer need the medication.
2. Secondly, if they have been gone for a period where the effects of the medication would have worn off and they do not have access to further supplies, it should be asked what effect this will have on them and their ability to survive. It is probable that an opinion should be sought from a suitably qualified medical practitioner.

### SCENARIO

David suffers from ADHD for which he is prescribed medication and makes him calmer. He ran away after a family argument, not taking his medication and stayed with a friend. As the effects of the medication wore off, his behaviour started to become anti-social and, combined with a lack of parental guidance, he was no longer welcome at the friend's house then was seriously assaulted while sleeping rough.

## Drug or alcohol dependency?

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This can influence a person's thinking and where they go in order to try to replenish their supplies and will also depend on what access they have to money. Clearly this can put them in risky situations in order to obtain further supplies. There may also be issues related to their alcohol or, more particularly, their drug abuse that may have a bearing on their having gone missing.

## Is there any indication that the person is likely to commit suicide?

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This is usually prompted by factors in a person's life, such as mental health, relationships or employment and linked to an event that adds to their stress and perceived inability to cope. Such an event could be a medical condition, work or financial difficulties, cultural issues and many more. Common symptoms include lack of self-worth, isolation, anger and self-harming (iFIND 2016). Consider whether or not the person has made any preparations for leaving, as not taking usual items (keys, wallet etc.) can be an indicator that they plan to commit suicide (Schouten et al 2016). This should not, however, be confused with the possibility of them being the subject of criminal activity.

### SCENARIO

Robert was reported missing from his home address and was known to be depressed. A large-scale search took place over several days and eventually a police officer saw a note on a kitchen cupboard door saying, 'I have gone to the lake to drown myself'. His body was found in a lake 50 metres from the house within a few hours.

## Have they attempted to commit suicide before?

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This is cited as one of the symptoms that can indicate a person's propensity to commit suicide and should be considered carefully, also bearing in mind that some people draw attention to themselves by self-harming. That said, self-harming can also be a symptom of other serious underlying problems and should be taken seriously in any case of the person being reported missing (Schouten et al 2016).

Belief that the person may not have the ability to interact safely with others or an unknown environment

This largely relates to their lifestyle, maturity and so forth. If they are the type of person who is resilient and a problem solver, they are more likely to find the means to survive and less so if the opposite applies.

# An explanation of the risk factors - environment

These are the main issues that should be considered but the list is not exhaustive. They may occur singly or in combination with each other or with factors outlined above. These influences can be considered as push and pull factors, i.e., those that push people to leave home and those that pull them away, usually things that seem to be more pleasant.

## Are there any concerns or suspicions about the person making the report or do they appear inappropriate?

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On occasions, someone who has caused harm to another person will report them missing in an attempt to cover up their actions and deflect attention from themselves. Also, the person making a missing person report may be using this as a means of attempting to locate that person, particularly an estranged partner who is, for example, trying to avoid domestic violence. It is important, therefore, to consider whether the person who is making the report appears inappropriate and what their motivation might be.

## Is the person suspected to be subject of a crime e.g., abduction (parental or criminal), honour related violence or kidnap?

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Some criminality is obvious, but not always so and questions must be carefully considered to elicit the right information. In particular when crime is the cause of the person being reported as missing, consideration must be given as to whether or not the person reporting has some involvement in that crime. If this is the case, they will have good reasons to deflect interest from themselves, hinder search and investigative activity or spread false information to mislead.

### SCENARIO

Judith was 4 years old and her father (who was divorced from her mother) reported her as being missing after not coming home from the playgroup she attended. He would not allow the police to enter the house to search it and demanded that they focus their activities where he said they would have a better chance of finding her. When the search did take place, they found her body concealed in the roof of the house.

## Are there family or relationship problems or recent history of family conflict and/or abuse?

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This may be difficult to find out as problems such as these are not easy to disclose and there may be reasons why someone would want to keep it secret. Also, some issues may not be known to the immediate family or friends and may only be discovered by talking to other friends or associates. Consideration should be given to whether these issues have created the reason for the missing person to go away or have they come to some harm at their hands.

## Are they the victim or perpetrator of domestic violence?

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Being a victim of domestic violence would provide an obvious reason for a person to leave home but, as above, this may not be revealed. Being a perpetrator may give a reason for the person to leave. Ascertaining any of this information may require further checks and if known to the police should be flagged against the home address.

## Are they on a Child Protection Plan?

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This will have different names in different countries but generally refers to a plan written by the relevant authorities when they are aware of safeguarding issues relating to a particular child. That a child is on such a plan may be of relevance to risk or harm and their reason for, going missing. It is worth checking to see if they are on such a plan.

## Bullying or harassment e.g., racial, sexual, homophobic etc.

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This can be very private to an individual and may not be something that they are able to tell other people about. It may manifest itself in other ways and be noticed through changes in behaviour or loss of confidence for example. Going missing may seem to be a way to escape these issues and, as is many of these causes, if the problem is not understood and dealt with, a pattern of repeatedly going missing may emerge.

### SCENARIO

Desmond, who was 15 years old, went missing from home and his mother tried to report him as missing to the police but they refused to take the report, as they did not think this behaviour was sufficiently unusual. His mother started making her own enquiries and found that her son had been the victim of racially motivated violence that he had not felt able to talk to an adult about. She found that he had been attacked and killed.

## Do they have school/college/ university/employment or financial problems?

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Any of these problems could be a factor in the person deciding to go missing. It is always important to remember that the problems may appear to be trivial to an observer but much more serious to the person who is in that situation and should be considered in light of their personal factors as above.

## Consider if forced marriage or honour based violence are an issue

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If the person reporting is a family member, forced marriage or honour based violence may not be cited as a reason for the disappearance and the question will have to be dealt with sensitively. Sometimes reports to the police will come from schools or other institutions to say that the person is not in attendance as they should be and the circumstances should be evaluated to consider if there are sinister reasons for their absence.

### SCENARIO

Ayesha was concerned that she was to be taken to her home country for an arranged marriage and told her schoolteacher about this. One of her school friends became aware that her family at the start of the holidays was taking Ayesha away and told a teacher, who told the police. It was then possible to intercept them before they left the country.

## Consider if they might be the victims of sexual exploitation. If so, going missing is likely to place them at considerable risk of harm.

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Going missing is recognised as one of the key indicators of sexual exploitation and will often result from the person being attracted to a lifestyle that is made to appear better and more interesting than what they have already. Changes in lifestyle and behaviour can be an indicator, as can the acquisition of new clothes or other items and secretive behaviour.

## Have they acquired new friends or relationships recently?

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This can provide an influence that leads someone to go missing, especially if the relationship is an illicit one. It may be related to sexual exploitation or it could be a new relationship. If the disappearance is unexplained then careful consideration should be given to whether or not there is undue influence being placed on the person even where exploitation is not the issue.

### SCENARIO

Rachel was 14 years old and her parents noticed that she was acting secretively, was acquiring new clothes and they suspected that she was drinking alcohol. She was verbally aggressive and defensive about her behaviour and was staying out later than normal but not enough to report her missing. One evening she was very late home and as her mother was about to report her missing, she was brought home by the police, having been noticed in a car with a man who was known to seek out young girls for exploitation.

## Online connections or contacts

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The risks posed by the use of the Internet are well documented and safety information is available elsewhere and will not be repeated here. Be aware of the possibility that the reason for going missing may result from online activity and inappropriate use of connections with people should be looked for.

## Are the weather conditions a factor?

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The weather on its own can present a serious risk, with a person being overcome by extreme conditions. It can also be the case that the risk increases with a combination of factors such as age, ill health, inadequate clothing, length of time missing etc. Such combinations should be assessed cumulatively to get an accurate reflection of risk.

## Other unlisted factors which the officer or supervisor considers should influence risk assessment?

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The factors listed do not cover everything and it is important to consider everything that may be of relevance, trusting professional judgement. It is important that as much information as possible is recorded when the report is first made to the police to ensure that the investigation is conducted properly.

## Examples of combined factors that can indicate risk

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**Adult males:** previously reported missing – history of talking about committing suicide and making attempts – reported missing and not giving any indication of wanting to commit suicide – committing suicide is a more serious risk

**Adult males:** reported missing after going on a night out (for example after leaving a nightclub or bar) – those missing over 48 hours 94% are found dead, with the majority found in water (Newiss, forthcoming).

**Male or female:** fails to return home as expected or misses appointment etc., - especially if out of character – risk exists and should be explored



# 11

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# Appendix 1 – Initial Missing Persons Risk Triage Checklist

This form is intended as a guide for police staff taking a call for service or a police officer making a first response in relation to a missing person.

<p><b>Personal</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does their age make them particularly vulnerable?</li> <li>• Is their behaviour out of character?</li> <li>• Any life-threatening illness or requiring medication?</li> <li>• Any mental health issues?</li> <li>• Have they attempted suicide before?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Environmental</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Any significant life event (e.g., suicide/death in family/bullying/loss of job)?</li> <li>• Relationship issues or breakdown?</li> <li>• Victim or perpetrator of Domestic Violence?</li> <li>• Victim of, or involvement in crime?</li> <li>• Any financial pressures?</li> <li>• Informant – not the logical reporting person?</li> <li>• Adverse weather conditions likely to put them at risk?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Other</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are there any other factors that may influence the risk?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Outcomes</b></p>	<p>If the answer to any of the above is 'Yes' consider an urgent response to the case, notifying a supervisor and making a more detailed evaluation.</p>

It is essential that this assessment of risk is kept under constant review to incorporate new information that is discovered

Missing person's name: .....

Completed by: .....

Time:..... Date: .....

## Appendix 2 – Detailed Decision-Making Guide Checklist

This is intended to assist an investigator to gather sufficient information to assist in assessing risk in relation to a missing person.

Personal factors	Investigators Comments (Is this a fact, what does it mean and what are the consequences?)
What type of person are they?	
Has the person's behaviour changed recently?	
Behaviour that is out character is often a strong indicator of risk; are the circumstances of going missing different from normal behaviour patterns?	
Have they been missing before?	
Is the person vulnerable due to age, infirmity or any other factor?	
Does the missing person have any physical illness or mental health problem?	
Do they need essential medication that is not likely to be available to them?	
Drug or alcohol dependency?	
Is there any indication that the person is likely to commit suicide?	
Have they attempted to commit suicide before?	
Belief that the person may not have the ability to interact safely with others or an unknown environment	

<b>Influences on the person's life/environment</b>	<b>Investigators Comments</b> (Is this a fact, what does it mean and what are the consequences?)
Are there any concerns or suspicions about the person making the report or do they appear inappropriate?	
Is the person suspected to be subject of a crime e.g., abduction (parental or criminal), honour related violence or kidnap?	
Are there family or relationship problems or recent history of family conflict and/or abuse?	
Are they the victim or perpetrator of domestic violence?	
Are they on a Child Protection Plan?	
Bullying or harassment e.g., racial, sexual, homophobic etc.	
Do they have school/college/ university/ employment or financial problems?	
Consider if forced marriage or honour based violence are an issue	
Consider if they might be the victim of sexual exploitation.	
Have they acquired new friends or relationships recently?	
Are the weather conditions likely to pose a risk?	
Other unlisted factors which the officer or supervisor considers should influence risk assessment?	

It is essential that this assessment of risk is kept under constant review to incorporate new information that is discovered

Missing person's name: .....

Completed by: .....

Time:..... Date: .....