
A Profile of Missing Persons: Some Key Findings for Police Officers

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2.1 Introduction

The most publicised reminders of inaccurate risk classification by police officers dealing with missing person's reports come from cases where the missing person was presumed to have runaway but was later found to have met with foul play. Fortunately, such occurrences are extremely rare. Despite this, there is still enormous pressure on the officer taking the initial missing persons report to ask the right questions, assess possible risk factors, make a judgement about what may have happened to the missing person and then allocate appropriate resources—all within a timely manner. For all police officers, and for every missing person report made, the task is complex (see Fyfe, Stevenson & Woolnough, 2014 for more on this). No research has been conducted in the area of misclassifications of risk when a new missing person report is received, so the true numbers remain unknown. Given the high numbers of missing persons reports that are made on a daily basis, it is important that researchers work towards helping all police officers make an informed and hopefully confident assessment of risk that has a high degree of reliability (Bartkowiak-Theron & Herrington, 2008).

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2.2 Incidence Rates in Australia

It is estimated that in Australia, approximately 35,000 persons were reported as missing for the period 2005–2006. Proportionately, this is a rate of 1.7 persons per 1000 Australians (James, Anderson & Putt, 2008). The New South Wales Police Force in Australia report that in 2010 11,595 people were reported missing in NSW, with 65% of people reported missing being under the age of 18 (NSW Police Force). Despite these large numbers, and despite some public misclassifications, and very harsh criticisms of the police service, no rigorous standards exist by which officers can assess the likely status of a missing person's risk.

Unfortunately, statistics on the incidence of missing persons reported to police across Australia are not routinely compiled into a national database, though efforts are currently underway to rectify this. This means there is no detailed information to enable deeper analysis or to explore national trends (Henderson, Henderson & Kiernan, 2000). Where statistics are recorded, persons who go missing several times within a 12-month period inflate any statistical profile. Additionally, sometimes a person is not discovered to be missing until his/her remains are found in an isolated outdoor location. Identifying who is a missing person is also made more difficult because adults are free to go missing (Swanton & Wilson, 1989). Other persons reported as missing

to the police are simply never located, as is evidenced by the approximately 400 unsolved missing persons cases being monitored by the NSW Missing Persons Unit at any one time (J. Sutcliffe, Personal Communication, January 4, 2001).

2.3 Making a Risk Assessment

It appears that the improper handling of a missing person report usually occurs because the officer in charge of investigating the report has regarded the missing person as a runaway or as someone who has chosen to voluntarily disappear (Simons & Willie, 2000). Only where the person is located deceased or injured due to foul play or suicide does it become clear that the initial report required a more urgent response. The challenge for the police is to accurately assess missing persons reports, assess the person making the report, understand the story that preceded the going missing event, and learn about the person that is missing.

In light of the consequences of incorrectly classifying a victim of homicide or classifying a suicidal person as a runaway, for example, it is argued that detailed research is needed so as to work towards developing more robust methods for classifying possible risk. The receipt of a missing persons report is, at times, the first indicator that a murder has been committed (ACPO, 2013).

More recently efforts have been made to develop guidelines by various law enforcement agencies in the UK (ACPO, 2005) as well as the USA and Australia (Sen. Constable Lisa Hoggard, personal communication, October 20, 2014). However, in some of these instances, the risk assessment process remains time consuming and labour intensive (Bayliss & Quinton, 2013). Most notably, however, is that the risk categorisation process still requires subjective interpretation as to the likely reasons for the person being missing. In Australia, and in other law enforcement agencies around the world, the categories of 'low', 'medium' and 'high' risk are often assigned to a missing person based on information such as age (children and older persons are considered to be high risk), possible harm that the persons might pose to themselves or the public and whether or

not the behaviour was deemed to be out of character. To date no research has assessed the accuracy of these risk assessments and the extent to which they improve the location of the missing person. Importantly, these very broad categories do not give any indication as to the reasons *why* a person is missing.

This chapter reviews some of the more salient findings from a larger study that is the first known attempt to establish a profile of missing persons. The research examined information that was extracted from police files that pertained to missing persons who, on being located, were determined to have run away or to have met with foul play. Examined were variables that were considered important for their capacity to make a prediction about one's missing person status. Many variables were also identified as relevant because of the possibility that such information might reveal previously unexplored patterns or trends that differentiate type of missing person. Only a small number of the more salient findings will be discussed in this chapter.

2.4 Lack of Missing Persons Research

Currently, there is no established way for the police to determine if a missing person is the victim of foul play or if that person is likely to shortly return home, and to date no research has been conducted in that area (Henderson et al., 2000; Maxson, Little & Klein, 1988; Newiss, 1999). Those studies that do exist have instead focused on the effect of police intervention (Plass, Finkelhor & Hotaling, 1995), assessment of the current legal and organisational status of police response to missing persons cases (Maxson et al., 1988) and perceptions of police response by significant others, as well as the costs of missing persons to the community (Henderson & Henderson, 1998). More recently, descriptive characteristics of children who experience an attempted or completed abduction were published by Newiss (2013).

The lack of research into the area of missing persons reports and their investigation is possibly

a function of the low profile awarded to this activity (James et al., 2008; Newiss, 1999). It perhaps also relates simply to the small numbers of missing people facing adverse circumstances. Of all the individuals who go missing each year, only a very small minority will be the victim of serious crime (Swanton & Wilson, 1989). Despite this, it is surprising that no research has explored whether there are any tangible differences between different types of missing person and, if there are differences, whether there is any predictive value in those qualities. More recently, research by Newiss has attempted to delineate age and gender differences in missing persons who have met with foul play (Newiss, 2004), as well as an exploration of subsamples of missing persons, such as research on abducted missing children (Newiss, 2013), and those who are missing for prolonged periods of time (Newiss, 2004). Tarling and Burrows (2004) also examined a random sample of just over 1000 missing persons and explored the outcomes. Despite these more recent research efforts, there still remains the need for advances towards an actuarial approach to risk assessment and missing persons, where the specific outcome, or reason for being missing, is explored.

The lack of research specific to the assessment of possible risk of harm experienced by the missing person is apparent in the lack of structured guidelines offered to police who are investigating a missing person report. Kiernan and Henderson (2002, p. 5) note that an 'objective base is required to better inform policy makers and practitioners so that effective strategies can be established in the missing person arena. All levels of the community need to be informed by empirical research rather than by misguided, ill-informed impressions of missing persons and their issues'. This is not to suggest, however, that assessment of risk should be reduced to a system of numerical scoring. The ACPO Manual of Guidance for the Management of Missing Persons (ACPO, 2005) argues for the importance of not doing this (see also Newiss, 2004). Instead, risk is classified according to a broad set of criteria that still enable the judgement of the officer receiving the missing person report. The importance of allowing for the subjective, human judgement is considered to be

critical in the development of an accurate risk assessment. The importance of being informed and guided by quantitative data is also considered to be extremely important in the risk assessment process (see Tarling & Burrows, 2004). An actuarial approach, in unison with personal experience and clinical judgement, is therefore considered to be optimal in the analysis and assessment of risk. Determining if there are characteristics that pertain to specific types of missing person, and which may help with the assessment of what it is that has likely happened to the missing person, is the focus of this chapter.

2.5 Previous Missing Persons Research

Most research on the topic of missing persons is conducted by large representative bodies with an interest in defining types of missing persons and estimating their incidence. Two large-scale studies have been conducted that offer the greatest contribution to the missing persons literature. The first is a large study conducted in 1998 in Australia by Henderson and Henderson. The main objective of the research was to explore the economic impact of missing persons on the Australian community; however, it also examined characteristics of the missing person population, such as age, gender, socioeconomic status, if there were any health or mental health issues and if there was a history of going missing. This research is one of the few studies internationally to include persons 18 years and over. Also examined were circumstances of the missing person incident, looking specifically at time of day and day of the week, when the person went missing, who made the missing person report, the season that the person was last seen, the reasons for going missing and details surrounding the location of the missing person. However, while the Henderson and Henderson research is an Australia-wide survey of missing persons, it does not specifically examine different categories of missing persons, and so in this sense the contribution of Henderson and Henderson's research to the present study is, unfortunately, limited.

The second study of notable influence was conducted in America in 1990 and then repeated in 2000. Research for the US Department of Justice, Division of Juvenile Delinquency, titled the National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children (National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, 1994) (commonly referred to as NISMART 1 and NISMART 2) is the largest project known to be conducted on missing persons worldwide (Flores, 2002). Unfortunately, like most studies on missing persons, this project restricted their missing persons research to include only children and adolescents under 18 years. The lack of missing persons research exploring the adult population is disturbing given that in Australia just less than 50% of those reported as missing persons were adults (Henderson & Henderson, 1998).

2.6 Profiling Applied to Missing Persons Cases

In the present research, profiling is a methodology used to identify not who the missing person is but rather what has happened to the missing person. The challenge is to determine what type of pre-disappearance behaviours and circumstances can be identified without the presence of the missing person. Factors relating to the psychological wellbeing of the individual, for instance, were key parts of the assessment. Given the complexity of social and psychological processes that give rise to running away, attempting or completing suicide as well as the circumstances surrounding foul play, the emphasis was on any available information that fits within a broad psychosocial framework and which has the potential to (a) offer distinguishing features between types of missing person and (b) assist in reliably predicting the reasons the person has for being missing.

This exploratory research was concerned only with runaway, suicide and foul play persons because these three categories occur more frequently than do other types of missing persons, such as those who are lost or who have been in an accident. Pre-disappearance behaviour is also

expected to be more easily differentiated across the three groups. For instance, those who have run away, as well as those who have committed suicide, are expected to have displayed, either explicitly or implicitly, behavioural evidence which supports their decision to run away or suicide. The three types of missing persons being analysed in this research are defined below.

2.6.1 Defining Runaway, Suicide and Foul Play Missing Persons

Runaways are defined as persons who have voluntarily left their place of residence with the intention of finding an alternative living environment for either the short term or the long term, and this has occurred without the authorisation or knowledge of significant others (Collins, Powers, McCalla, Ringwalt & Lucas, 1993). Adult runaways are those who have deserted or abandoned their place of residence. Because of problems with the definition of runaways as separate from throwaways, the latter category is also included in this research. They are defined as persons who are either told to leave or whose parents, friends or partner did not want the missing person to return home or did not care whether or not he or she returned home (Collins et al., 1993). Runaways and throwaways can include children, adolescents or adults who were reported as missing.

Suicide is defined as a person who has left with the intention to attempt or complete suicide and who has been reported missing as a result. For the present research, the suicide group includes completed suicide attempts as well as serious but unsuccessful suicide attempts.

Foul play is defined as a person who is abducted and possibly murdered and who was reported as a missing person. Foul play includes those abducted by a family member, which commonly occurs during a custody or visitation dispute, as well as nonfamily abduction whereby coercion has been used to take a child, adolescent or adult (Collins et al., 1993).

Ultimately in the present study, it is the circumstances surrounding the location of the missing person that determines the classification that

the missing person is allocated. The possibility that some of the missing persons went missing for reasons other than what they intended cannot be ruled out. For instance, it is possible that one who is the victim of homicide initially left with the intention to run away or that one who left with the intention to suicide later decided to more simply run away.

This study relied on the examination of information recorded by police in closed missing person files. Extracting the relevant information from police files, as well as adequately interpreting the findings, was achieved by drawing on a number of different perspectives. At the most fundamental level, information pertaining to the missing person's behaviour was used to guide the collection of information for each type of missing person category. Two guiding theoretical perspectives are relevant here. The first is the view that behaviour is open to functional analysis (Cooper, Shapiro & Powers, 1998) which maintains that behaviour is best understood in terms of the goals or needs it serves; the second is behavioural consistency theory, originally espoused by Canter (1995), who states that past behaviour is predictive of future behaviour. The first highlights behaviour for its purposefulness, and the second for its consistency and predictability. Offering more guidance again, a practical framework for the examination of both the purpose of behaviour and its consistency is victimology theory which is useful for its literature on victims of crime. Finally, psychological autopsy as a methodology is extensively relied on within the suicide literature because it highlights the psychological state of the individual prior to the suicide act.

Key theoretical principles inherent in the FBI model, investigative psychology, psychological autopsy and victimology theory, are relevant to missing persons and the search for contrasting profiles. Awareness of the underlying psychological principles enables the profiles to be created and understood within a larger framework (Canter, 1995). Importantly, no one theory or approach dominates the search for unique features within the three types of missing person as they are all, to varying degrees, implicit in this exploration.

2.6.2 Analysing Runaway, Suicide and Foul Play Missing Persons

All the data for this research was extracted from archived police files of solved missing persons cases. Information was also obtained from long-term missing persons files where cases were finalised by the coroner and the person was deemed deceased due to suicide or foul play. Data was also extracted from solved homicide cases from the Homicide Library attached to the New South Wales Police Force. The objective was to determine if there exists a meaningful and unique profile of factors that allows each type of missing person to be distinguishable from the remaining two. This is a first attempt to quantify the various types of information that police have available to them and to assess the possibility that this information can serve to distinguish the three groups.

2.6.2.1 Criterion Selection and Data Reduction

All aspects of the information contained within the files were considered for their capacity to distinguish between types of missing person. Determining what aspects of the data were suitable and obtainable required combing through the files a number of times. As many variables as possible were created at the beginning of the data collection process (greater than 60), and only with repeated readings of the files, consideration towards the theoretical relevance of the information and checks as to the frequency of occurrence of the variables were a final set of variables determined to be included. Information was obtained from police files concerning (a) the reporting person's details about the missing person (e.g. gender, age, marital status, occupation), (b) details consistent with the psychological autopsy method (e.g. mental status prior to going missing), (c) details consistent with victimology (e.g. risk-taking behaviour) and (d) the event characteristics (e.g. when and where the missing person was last seen). A total of 26 variables were isolated and analysed which resulted in a very rich and dynamic picture of the three

different missing persons types. Only three of the more salient findings are examined here because they both support previous research findings and offer new insights. Details of the data collection process and the variables extracted are detailed elsewhere (Foy, 2006). The characteristics presented here include (a) whether the missing person was last seen in a public place or at home, (b) whether the disappearance is out of character and (c) the suspicions of the reporting person.

2.6.2.2 The Analyses

The analysis of the data for the present study comprised two stages. In the first stage the data were examined using the chi-square test of independence statistic. The objective of this statistical technique was to look closely at the various qualities that differentiate the three types of missing persons who were known to have run away, attempted or completed suicide or who had met with foul play. The chi-square test of independence is used to determine whether there is a significant difference between the expected frequencies and the observed frequencies across the three categories of missing person. The second stage required examination of the residuals which reveal which of the three missing persons types are contributing towards the statistically significant chi-square. Assessment of the residuals is an important part of this data analysis because, without a thorough examination of the residuals, one cannot determine which variables are contributing to a significant chi-square result. Much more detailed information regarding the statistical analyses is located elsewhere (Foy, 2006). For the purposes of this overview, it is sufficient to note that inspection of the residual indicates the degree of statistical significance.

The analyses conducted answer the questions: Do the number of individuals or objects that fall in each category differ significantly from the number you would expect? Is this difference between the expected and observed due to sampling variation, or is it a real difference? Significant results indicate a real difference between the three types of missing person on the characteristic discussed.

2.7 Overview of Entire Missing Persons Sample

A total of 357 missing persons files were selected for inclusion in this research. The sample ranged in age from 9 years to 77 years with a mean age of 28 years ($SD=15$ years). In this research, more adolescents were reported missing than any other age group (mode=15 years), which is consistent with previous reports. Figure 2.1 presents the 357 missing persons in this sample according to their missing person category. There were 250 (70%) runaways, 54 (15.1%) persons who attempted or completed suicide and 53 (14.8%) persons missing due to foul play. Presented below are figures detailing the type of missing person, age according to missing person status and followed by a breakdown according to gender.

Figure 2.2 graphically depicts the five age categories according to the three types of missing person. Noteworthy is that almost half (47.6%, $n=119$) of the '17 and under' age group fall into the runaway category, while those aged between 41 and 65 were overrepresented (44.4%, $n=24$) in the suicide category. For the foul play category, those aged 18–25 comprised 39.6% ($n=21$) of the foul play sample. This is consistent with other missing persons research.

Gender and type of missing person. There were 184 females (51.5%) in the entire sample, compared to 173 (48.5%) males. Figure 2.3 depicts gender according to the three types of missing person. Of the 250 runaway cases, 54.4% ($n=136$) were female and 45.6% ($n=114$) were male. For the suicide sample 18.5% ($n=10$) were female, while 81.5% ($n=44$) were male. For the foul play sample, 71.7% ($n=38$) were female and 28.3% ($n=15$) were male. These findings are consistent with other findings (see Biehal, Mitchell & Wade, 2003).

Private versus public place and missing person category. This variable categorises where the person who is missing was last seen. The categories are (a) whether they were in their own home or (b) in a place other than their home (such as place of employment or a friend's residential home) which is referred to as a public place. Just over half of the runaway sample (55.2%, $n=138$) were

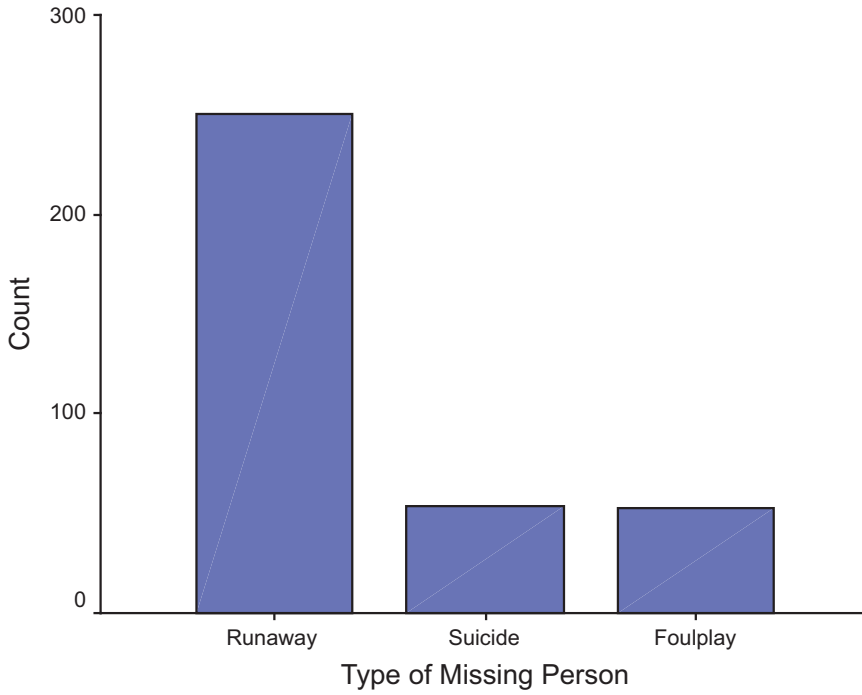


Fig. 2.1 The missing persons sample according to missing person category (Copyright: Shaunagh Foy)

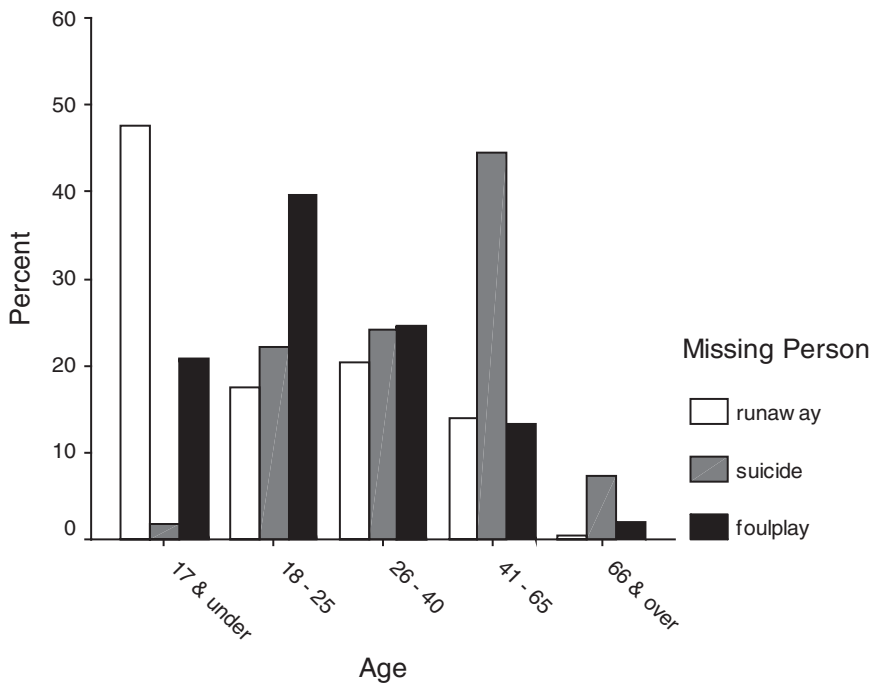


Fig. 2.2 Age according to missing person category (Copyright: Shaunagh Foy)

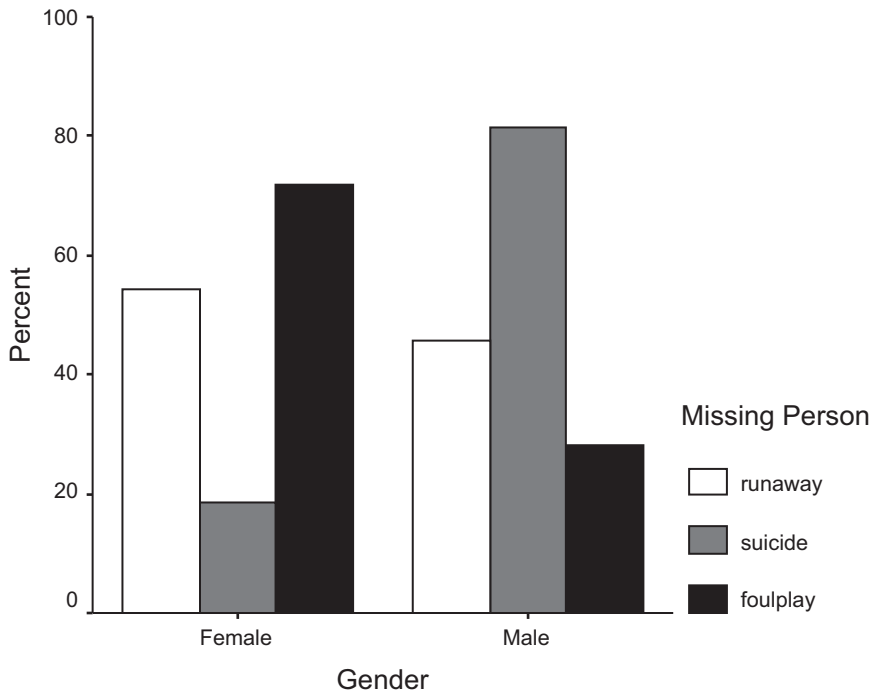


Fig. 2.3 Gender according to missing person category (Copyright: Shaunagh Foy)

last seen at home with 36% ($n=90$) last being seen in a public place. For the suicide group, 48.1% ($n=26$) were last seen at home, and 48.1% ($n=26$) were last seen outside of their home. For the foul play group, 84.9% ($n=45$) were last seen outside of their home, and only 7.5% ($n=4$) were last seen in their home (see Fig. 2.4).

Chi-square analysis revealed that when all three groups were assumed to be equally distributed across the place of last sighting, runaway persons were less likely to be last seen in public, whereas those who fell victim to foul play were nearly always last seen in public. This finding was highly significant. The observation that 84.9% of the foul play cases were last seen in a public place supports the strong standardised residual, as well as the strong chi-square statistic achieved for this analysis. Persons missing due to suicide remained evenly distributed within the contingency table so there were no significant residuals for this category of missing person.

Personality and behavioural factors: The following analyses detail some of the factors that are specific to the missing person's personality or

behavioural history, as recorded in the police files. The variables constituting this theme include (1) whether the disappearance was out of character for him or her or (2) what suspicions the reporting person has about what has happened to the missing person:

1. *Whether the disappearance was out of character and missing person category.* For the runaway sample, it was out of character for the person to be missing for 42% ($n=105$) of the cases. Going missing was considered not to be out of character for 32.4% ($n=81$) of the runaway sample. For the suicide sample, being missing was considered to be out character for 81.5% ($n=44$) of the sample, while only 9.3% ($n=5$) of the reporting persons thought it was not out of character for the person to be missing. For the foul play sample, 83% ($n=44$) of the cases stated that it was out of character for the person to be missing. No cases stated that the going missing behaviour was not out of character for the person missing due to foul play (Fig. 2.5).

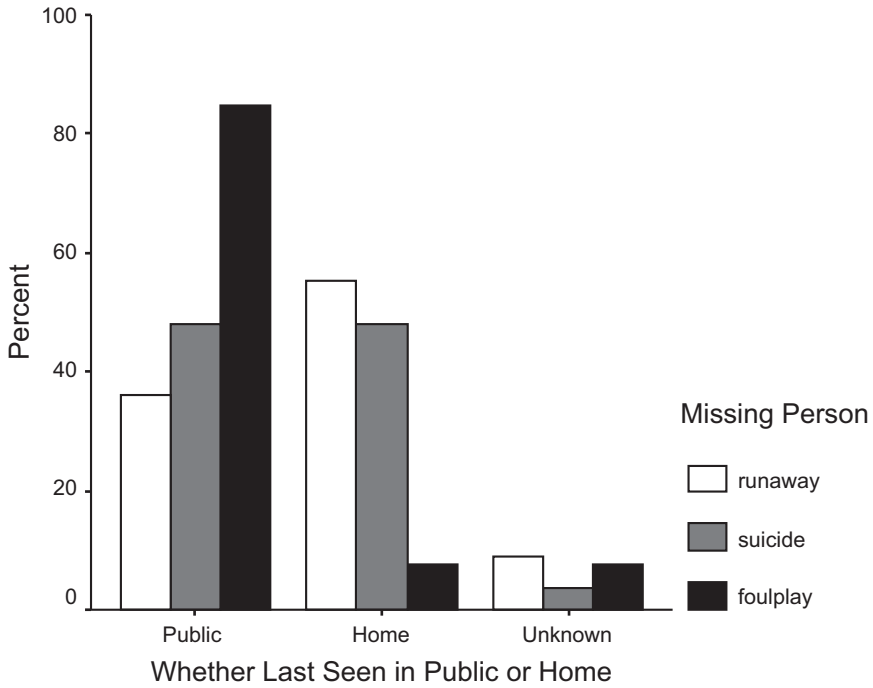


Fig. 2.4 Whether missing person was last seen in public or at home according to missing person category (Copyright: Shaunagh Foy)

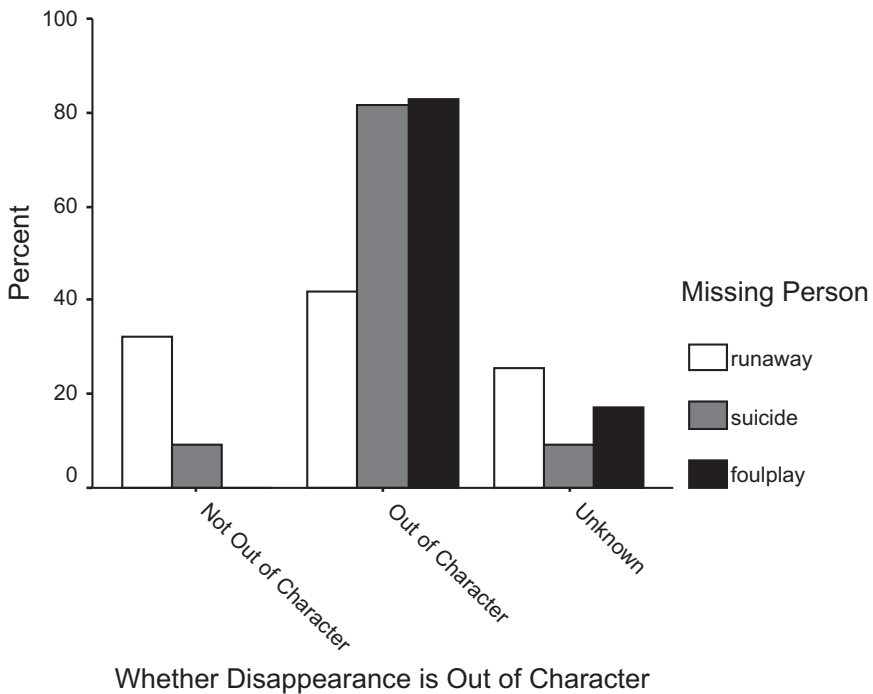


Fig. 2.5 Whether disappearance is considered to be out of character according to type of missing person (Copyright: Shaunagh Foy)

For the chi-square analyses, there were significant differences between the three groups on this variable, which proved to be very rich in information. When compared between types of missing person, persons who had run away from their place of residence were more likely to be regarded by the reporting person as behaving in a way that was not out of character. On the contrary, the suicide samples were less likely to be regarded as behaving in a way that was not out of character for the missing person and more likely to be regarded as behaving in a way that was out of character. Particularly strong, however, were the results of the foul play sample. None of the reporting persons regarded the disappearance as being 'not out of character' for the missing person with this providing strong statistical significance. Correspondingly, 44 (83%) reporting persons for those missing due to foul play indicated to the police that the disappearance 'was out of character'.

2. *Suspensions or fears of the reporting person.*

This variable describes what the reporting person thinks has happened to the missing person to explain why he or she is missing. For the runaway sample, 63.6% ($n=159$) were correctly suspected as having run away. For the suicide sample, 74.1% ($n=40$) were correctly suspected as having left to suicide, and for the foul play sample 79.2% ($n=42$) were suspected as having fallen victim to some unknown misadventure.

In terms of statistical analyses, runaways were, on average, correctly identified as having run away by the person reporting with 63.6% of the runaways correctly identified. In contrast, those who were thought to have suicided when in fact they had run away occurred less frequently than expected, accounting for only 12% of the runaway sample. Also occurring less frequently than expected were the number of runaways who were suspected of being missing because of misadventure who comprised 13.6% of the runaway sample. Overall, the reporting person was more often correct when he or she stated his or her suspicions about why the person was missing, and these findings revealed strong statistical significance.

A similar pattern was noted for those who had suicided, with 74.1% being correctly identified as having left with suicidal intent. This finding was significant. Occurring much less frequently than expected was the finding that there was only one person who completed suicide who was thought to have run away, and likewise only one person who had suicided was thought to be missing because of misadventure. Overall, then, this suggests that for many cases, when a reporting person suspects their friend or relative has left to suicide, the reporting person is very often right.

For those who were the victim of foul play, 79.2% ($n=42$) were correctly regarded as having met with misadventure by the reporting person. Only one foul play victim was thought to have run away, and only two foul play victims were thought to have left with suicidal intent. These findings were also statistically significant (Fig. 2.6).

2.8 Conclusion

This research outlines a theoretical and empirical approach that unambiguously links circumstantial evidence, as well as one's knowledge of the missing person with the person's reasons for being missing. The results from the chi-square analyses performed in this research provide the police with explicit themes that are common to the lives of the different types of missing person. The predominant behavioural style that a missing person exhibits adds weight to the notion that the three types of missing person can be profiled by virtue of the consistency of their behaviour. On its own this information has the potential to help police direct their questions towards areas that are relevant, informative and discriminating.

While these findings are hopeful, it is important to note a key limitation in this research. The findings from this research should not be used to guide the decision making of police officers because in this study (a) the sample sizes are very small, and (b) only three types of missing persons were examined in this research. It is impossible to know if the suspicions of the reporting person only occur when the person has run away, suicided or met with foul play. It is quite possible that persons missing due to being in an accident

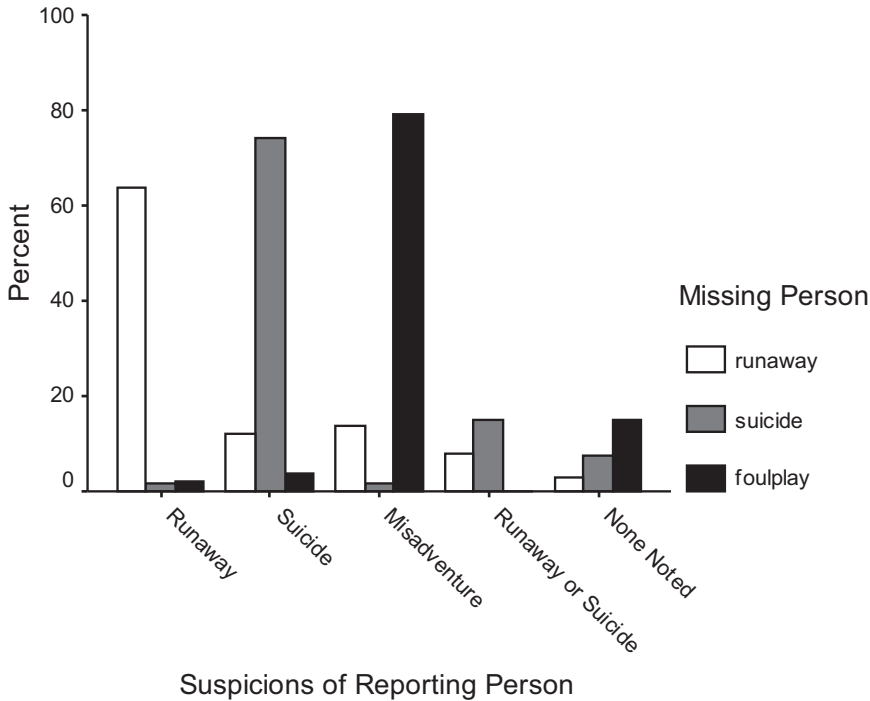


Fig. 2.6 Suspicions of the reporting person according to missing person category (Copyright: Shaunagh Foy)

of some kind are also frequently thought of as missing due to misadventure (see Henderson & Henderson, 1998 for related research). Hence, the results of this research should not be interpreted as indicating that all suspicions of misadventure are automatically indicative of foul play specifically nor that all suspected suicides are indicative of suicide or that all suspected runaways are runaways. The strong effect for suspicions of the reporting person does, however, point towards the accuracy of interpersonal and social perceptions and judgement (see also Ambady & Rosenthal, 1992).

One of the key obstacles for police officers who must fulfil their duty to assess the likely risk factors involved, manage the investigation and communicate to others about the missing person is that no explicit professional standards exist in law enforcement practice and there have been few efforts internationally to develop or evaluate interventions to improve decision making in this area. Based on the available literature, there is only limited evidence of efforts to develop training programmes in risk assessment (Bayliss &

Quinton, 2013). At a minimum the findings from the present study highlight the potential utility that profiling has within law enforcement.

The present research offers policing personnel specific characteristics about the person that previously has not been fully realised, in regard to both the relevance of certain characteristics and unique ways in which the groups differ overall. The strongest message from these findings is twofold. The first is that the circumstances surrounding where a missing person was last seen distinguish those who have met with foul play from the runaway and suicide groups, and the second is just how accurate the judgements of the reporting person are. Those who know the missing person are in the best position to make the judgement about the likely motives or goals of the person, as well as (to some extent) the possible risks that the missing person may be exposed to.

The findings from the present research achieved their goal in that they communicate to the police factors that are associated with the increased risk of being a runaway, suicide

or foul play victim who is reported as a missing person. While limitations exist, the results from this study improve on traditional methods of risk assessment by explicitly acknowledging that patterns within missing person's data can be identified and, that with the implementation of more sensitive and standardised data collection procedures and advanced computing methods, the generation of sensitive classification and prediction criteria is very possible.

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