



Providing Families of Missing People with the same support as Victims of Crime

“Our friend’s number plate was stolen and they were offered counselling by the police, but we’ve been offered no counselling, you feel there’s no real backup or support.”¹

Background

Every year approximately 250,000 people are reported missing to police forces and other agencies across the United Kingdom. Whilst the majority of disappearances are resolved relatively quickly,² others continue for weeks, months and even years, leaving family members to cope with the pain of not knowing where their loved one is or what has happened to them.

Missing People is a UK charity that provides a lifeline to missing adults and runaway children, as well as the families they leave behind. In addition to the emotional trauma these families experience, the charity’s research report *Living in Limbo*³ highlights a range of practical, legal and financial difficulties that can also arise from a disappearance, as well as the urgent need for better and more accessible support.

This is the aim of the charity’s Missing Rights campaign, which calls for legal provisions and services to take account of the wide-ranging issues families can face. Since there are clear parallels between the needs of these families and victims of crime, Missing People is calling on the Government to recognise the families of missing people within the Victim’s Code, in order to ensure that they get the help they need.

Parallels with victims of crime

As it stands, victims of crime are usually referred to a source of emotional and practical support by the police. Victim Support – a national charity which receives Government funding - usually provides these core services. These referrals can be as a consequence of a broad range of crimes; from relatively low level offences such as petty theft, to more serious crimes including homicide.

Missing People has noted that there are clear parallels between the experiences of families bereaved by homicide, and those of the families of longer term missing people (that is, when a relative has been missing for 90 days or longer). For example, the negative impacts of bereavement identified by the former Victim’s Commissioner⁴ (including ill health, unemployment, debt, relationship breakdown and housing problems) are similar to those identified by Missing People’s research *Living in Limbo*, which examined the impact of having a loved one go missing on those left behind.

¹ Quote from Missing People’s [Family Feedback Survey 2011](#)

² The Missing Persons Bureau indicates that 77 per cent of missing people come back or are located within 16 hours. However 3 per cent of cases remain outstanding for longer than a week (NPIA, 2012) and around 1 per cent of cases for more than a year (NPIA, 2010).

³ Homes, L. (2008) [Living in Limbo: the experiences of, and impacts on, the families of missing people](#) London: Missing People

⁴ Casey, L. (2011) [Review into the Needs of Families Bereaved by Homicide](#)



Furthermore, when a relative is missing for a longer period of time, some families may also suspect that their loved one has become a victim of crime:

“Right from the start I just presumed something had happened to her... We are a close knit family, but I was closest to mum... I knew things like she wouldn’t go anywhere without her handbag.”⁵

- Daughter of a missing woman

As a result of these similarities, the charity believes that families of longer term missing people must be made aware of tailored support available that may help them cope with their situation. This would be aided by recognising these families as victims of crime, so that they can be properly provided for. This is particularly important in longer term cases, whereby families’ needs, including practical (e.g. their relative’s financial commitments), legal and emotional matters can become increasingly complex:

“[My daughter] is a chef. She has her own house, almost inevitably with a mortgage, house insurance, car insurance, bank accounts and investments. It was literally a very few weeks before I realised the difficulty in trying to deal with these matters when she is missing.”⁶

- Father of a missing woman

Through classing families of longer term missing people as victims of crime, they will be provided with the support they so urgently need.

Classifying families of longer term missing people as victims of crime

“If you get robbed, you’d get a counsellor or something; but if someone goes missing you don’t really have that guidance.”⁷

Missing People believes that there is a strong case for the Victim Code to be widened to include families in cases where a family member has been missing for 90 days or longer.⁸ Within this classification, families of missing people could be signposted to support tailored to their needs, and covering matters beyond the remit of the police.

“We liken it to support given to victims...the Bureau definitely has a role to play in assisting forces, to produce the same level of response we see in victim support.”⁹

- Head of the Missing Persons Bureau

The charity sees 90 days as an appropriate duration. Where disappearances are usually concluded relatively quickly, it is unlikely that families will need support beyond that which Missing People already provides to police forces in helping to resolve cases. Furthermore, in many of these cases it may be that a crime has not been committed and families would not recognise themselves as secondary victims.

It is also in line with the Justice Select Committee’s recent proposals around introducing a legal system of ‘guardianship’ modelled on that in place in Australia or similar; the Australian model enables families to apply to safeguard their relative’s financial and legal affairs 90 days after the missing incident.¹⁰

⁵ Homes, L. (2008) [Living in Limbo: the experiences of, and impacts on, the families of missing people](#) London: Missing People. p.24

⁶ APPG for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults (2011) [Inquiry into support for families of missing people: Report with recommendations](#) London: Missing People. P.12

⁷ Quote from Missing People’s [Family Feedback Survey 2011](#)

⁸ See our submission to the Ministry of Justice’s consultation on victims and witnesses for more detail on how this fits with existing policy and legislation.

⁹ APPG for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults (2011) [Inquiry into support for families of missing people: Report with recommendations](#) London: Missing People. p.2



Whilst policy guidance does exist to encourage police forces to refer families to Missing People and other relevant organisations (e.g. Missing Abroad) as soon as they report the missing incident,¹¹ this is soft guidance and therefore it is not guaranteed. Through making referral systematic for families of longer term missing people, those with the most complex needs will be more regularly offered.

Progressing work in Westminster

In June 2011, the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults (to which Missing People is the joint Secretariat) ran the UK's first inquiry into support for families of missing people. The inquiry was led by APPG Chair Ann Coffey MP over four oral evidence sessions.

The APPG made a number of recommendations, including the need to introduce a statutory requirement so that family members who make a missing person report are signposted to the police and to the appropriate services for free emotional, practical and legal support as standard.

The Home Office Minister responsible for Missing Persons welcomed the APPG Inquiry and endorsed the principles behind the Committee's recommendations. In response to the overarching recommendation, the Home Office went on to publish a cross-government strategy on Missing Children and Adults.¹²

This strategy sets out the expectation that: 'the police should ensure all families of missing people are automatically signposted to support services that are available to them, for example the Missing People charity helpline'. Whilst a positive policy statement, it falls short of the mandatory requirement that Missing People is seeking.

Missing People therefore welcomed the recent consultation on victims and witnesses by the Ministry of Justice, which provided a timely opportunity for Government to recognise the impact a missing incident can have on family members. In its response to the consultation, the charity again advocated for a change to the current Victim Code, asking the Government to recognise the family support element of its work as a national service.

Missing People will continue to work with the Government and Parliament, along with the Missing Persons Bureau, ACPO, CEOP and other relevant policing and victim support agencies, to call for this classification and standardised signposting of families of missing people to be introduced.

For more information, please contact the Missing People Policy and Research team at policyandresearch@missingpeople.org.uk

Missing People would like to thank Tracesmart for supporting the work of the charity



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¹⁰ House of Commons Justice Select Committee (2012) [Presumption of Death](#) London: The Stationary Office Limited

¹¹ ACPO (2010) [Guidance on the Management, Recording and Investigation of Missing Person 2010](#) Bramshill: NPIA; Home Office (2011) [Missing Children and Adults: A Cross Government Strategy](#) London: Home Office

¹² Home Office (2011) [Missing Children and Adults: A Cross Government Strategy](#) London: Home Office