

Estimation of risk for missing individuals: Development of an empirical risk assessment tool for missing person investigations

Developing an evidence-based, structured professional judgement risk assessment tool for missing person investigations.

Key details

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| Lead institution | Abertay University |
| Principal researcher(s) | Nesha Dixon n.dixon1200@abertay.ac.uk |
| Police region | Scotland |
| Collaboration and partnership | This research is supported by Police Scotland and funded by Abertay University and the Scottish Institute for Policing Research (SIPR). |
| Level of research | PhD |
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| Date due for completion | July 2024 |

Research context

In the UK, an average of 891 missing person incidents are reported to the police daily (National Crime Agency (NCA), 2021). Although most missing persons are located safely within 48 hours, there were 955 fatal outcomes and over 6,500 non-fatal harm outcomes in 2019–20 (NCA, 2021).

The police are faced with the complex task of determining which incidents are most likely to result in harm and where to appoint their resources. A vital aspect of this decision-making process is assessing the level of risk present in each case. The current missing person risk assessment process adopts a professional judgement approach, where assessments are subjective and rely on police officers using their own knowledge and experience to assign cases into low, medium and high-risk categories (Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO), 2010; College of Policing, 2016). This common-sense approach to risk assessment can be susceptible to biases and inaccuracies, with risk assessments often varying based on service length and operational experience (Murray and Thomson, 2010).

The overall aim of this PhD project is to develop an evidence-based, structured professional judgement (SPJ) risk assessment tool for missing person investigations. The project consists of the following four stages.

1. A systematic literature review to identify risk factors within the existing literature that are associated with harm outcomes for missing adults and children.
2. Analysis of Police Scotland missing person cases to identify statistically significant risk factors associated with harm outcomes.
3. Survey of professionals working in a role relating to missing persons to explore their perspectives on what risk factors are the most important for assessing risk of harm in missing person cases.
4. Development of a novel SPJ tool for risk assessing missing person cases.

Research methodology

Stage one

Stage one involved a systematic literature review, with a total of 81 papers included in the final review.

Stage two

The first phase of stage two involved the analysis of 21,476 missing person cases using a series of Pearson chi-square tests for association to explore what individual risk factors are statistically associated with these broad harm outcomes (traced alive or deceased).

The second phase of stage two involves a more in-depth analysis of a sub-sample of missing person cases to identify risk factors associated with specific harm outcomes (no harm, fatal harm, non-fatal harm).

Stage three

Stage three will involve a mixed-method analysis (quantitative and qualitative) of survey responses from professionals working in a role relating to missing persons to establish what risk factors they deem the most important in the risk assessment of missing persons.

Research participation

Abertay University is looking for UK-based professionals working in any role relating to missing persons to take part in a survey exploring:

- professional perspectives on the current missing person risk grading process
- what risk factors are considered the most important for assessing the risk of harm in missing person cases

[Read more about the study and take part](#)

Tags

- [Missing persons](#)
- [Risk](#)