

Missing-persons - Guidance overview

This page is from APP, the official source of professional practice for policing.

First published 22 November 2016 Updated 3 July 2026

Overview

The purpose of this authorised professional practice (APP) is to ensure that reports of missing persons are managed and investigated effectively, supported by appropriate governance and safeguarding measures. A missing person report should be treated as an opportunity to identify and address vulnerability and risks, prioritising actions that make people safe, provide support and prevent crime. Police resources should be directed proportionately, with the most intensive activity focused on those assessed as being at greatest risk.

Going missing is often an indicator that an individual may be at risk of harm. The safeguarding of vulnerable people is paramount. The reasons for going missing can be complex and linked to social, family or criminal factors. Officers should consider three key objectives in every missing person investigation:

- protecting those at risk of harm
- minimising distress and providing a high-quality service to families and carers
- prosecuting those who perpetrate harm or pose a risk of harm, where supported by evidence

Definition of a missing person

Anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established will be considered missing until they are located and their wellbeing is confirmed. This broad definition ensures that all cases reported to the police are considered for a policing response. However, not all reports require immediate deployment of police resources. Officers and staff should base their decisions on a structured [assessment of risk](#).

Legal requirements

Forces must comply with their legal duties under common law and the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). These include:

- a duty to protect life and property, prevent and detect crime, and keep the King's peace
- a duty under [Article 2 of the ECHR](#) to act where there is a real, immediate risk to life
- a duty under [Article 3 of the ECHR](#) to act where there is a real, immediate risk of significant harm amounting to inhuman or degrading treatment
- a duty under [Article 4 of the ECHR](#) to act where there is a real, immediate risk of slavery or servitude

Additional duties apply in respect of children under [section 11](#) and [section 16E](#) of the [Children Act 2004](#) and the [Working together to safeguard children guidance](#).

For further information, go to [Investigating child abuse and safeguarding children APP](#).

Police forces must also respect a person's right to private and family life under [Article 8 of the ECHR](#). Adults with capacity have a legal right to go missing. Officers must balance safeguarding responsibilities with this right and must avoid unnecessary intrusion. Police do not have a legal duty to investigate all reports of missing people.

For further information, go to the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) [Advice on the legal duties on the police to investigate missing person](#).

Police involvement

There are circumstances where a person's whereabouts is unknown, but police involvement is not necessary. Examples include where contact has been lost following a family breakdown and there is no indication of harm. In these cases, the focus should be on reducing harm or the risk of harm, rather than solely tracing individuals. Officers should consider referral to other agencies that can provide assistance and support to the person (or persons) reporting.

Officers and staff should be mindful that people's backgrounds, identities and needs vary. Cultural, religious or lifestyle factors may influence how individuals behave or how families respond when someone cannot be located. It is important to avoid assumptions about an individual's behaviour, circumstances or level of risk to ensure an unbiased and professional response.

In some cases, perceptions of maturity or independence may not reflect the actual vulnerability of a child or young person. Adultification can result in their risks being underestimated. This can affect any child and has been shown to disproportionately impact black children. For further information, go to [Adultification and adultification bias: Rapid evidence assessment](#).

Parents and care providers, for both children and adults, are expected to take reasonable steps to locate the missing person before making a report to the police. These steps may include:

- attempting to contact the child or adult
- calling friends or family
- visiting areas where the child or adult is known to frequent
- visiting the place where the child or adult was expected to be, such as a friend's house or party
- checking whether any items are missing from the home

Responsibilities of care providers should be outlined in [local protocols](#).

Police involvement may be appropriate if there is concern that a parent or care provider could be at risk when attempting to gain access to an address where the person is believed to be.

There will be occasions where children or adults go missing from care for short periods and are located without the incident being reported to the police. In these circumstances, the care provider is responsible for recording the incident and documenting any information about the individual's whereabouts while away. This ensures that safeguarding plans can be updated to reflect any new risks or concerns.

Where available, police should review records held by care providers. These records can show whether the person has previously gone missing and can provide details of their whereabouts during those incidents. Accessing this information helps to inform risk assessments and supports effective safeguarding.

Tracking a lost relative

The police service is not a tracing agency and there are specialist organisations that are better placed to assist an individual who wishes to locate a lost relative. Go to [UK Missing Persons Unit \(UKMPU\)](#) and the [support services section](#) of this APP for further information.

However, if it is suspected that the person may be at [risk of harm](#), an investigation should be commenced to ensure their safety.

For further information, go to:

- [Initial response to suspected parental abduction](#)

- [Initial response to honour-based abuse](#)

Joint responsibility

The police should provide support and consider referral to an appropriate agency, such as a specialist non-government organisation or the local authority where statutory thresholds are met under [Working together to safeguard children](#) or adult safeguarding procedures. This enables concerns about the standard of care to be reviewed where appropriate. For further information, go to [Adults at risk APP](#).

Individuals whose whereabouts are known are not considered missing but may require other police activity to ensure their welfare. Officers should follow local public protection procedures to provide an appropriate safeguarding response. This includes children in care who are deemed to be “absent without authorisation”, as defined in the Department for Education [Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care](#). For further information, go to [Child abuse APP](#).

Risk of significant harm

Significant harm may arise in any missing person case and can take many forms, including physical, emotional, psychological or situational factors that affect a person's safety or wellbeing. This may include threats to their physical safety, exploitation, coercion or other factors that reduce their ability to protect themselves or make informed decisions about their welfare.

For children, [section 47 of the Children Act 1989](#) sets out significant harm as the threshold for mandatory child protection intervention. Significant harm may result from ill-treatment, the impairment of health or development, or any situation in which the child's welfare may be compromised. Children who are missing may be exposed to circumstances that increase their vulnerability or place them at risk of significant harm.

Specific investigations

This APP applies to all reports of missing persons. While there are core principles, legal requirements and risks that apply in every case, some investigations require additional focus due to the individual's vulnerability or the circumstances in which they are missing.

Further advice and information is provided in the appendix, [Specific missing person investigations](#).

Tags

APP Missing persons