

Missing Persons Investigations; A qualitative analysis of expert opinions relating to Prevention Interviews

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Prevention Interviews

Authorised Professional Practice (APP) guidance relating to missing persons investigations specifies that when a missing person is found or returns, the police have a responsibility to ensure that they are safe and well (College of Policing, 2018, May 4). Prevention Interviews (formerly known as a safe and well checks) provide an important opportunity to identify people at risk, understand the risks and issues faced whilst missing, reduce the risks of future episodes of missing or running away, and equip people with the resources and knowledge of how to stay safe if they do choose to run away again (DfE, 2014, 15-16).

The APP guidance states that Prevention Interviews should be carried out in all high risk cases, but should also be considered for no apparent risk (absent), low, and medium cases. Current guidance suggests that they should be carried out in person within 72 hours of the missing person being found or returning from going missing (DfE, 2014, 14).

Research and anecdotal evidence has shown that there are inconsistencies between police forces across the UK as to (i) when Prevention Interviews are conducted, (ii) why they are conducted, (iii) which cases are selected for Prevention Interviews, and (iv) what questions are asked during the interview.

Aim of the current study

The aim of the study was to better understand practice and procedure relating to Prevention Interviews, including variations in practice and procedure, and opinions relating to how it might be improved.

Ethical approval was gained from the Psychology Department at Goldsmiths University of London.

Method

Adopting a questionnaire design distributed online via Qualtrics, the following six research questions were addressed; (1) In your own opinion, what is your primary objective (or objectives) for conducting Prevention Interviews?, (2) What is your current standard procedure in place for conducting Prevention Interviews?, (3) What are your main frustrations with the procedure surrounding Prevention Interviews?, (4) What is the most valuable information from Prevention Interviews and why?, (5) How do you use the data from the Prevention Interviews?, and (6) How do you think the procedure of conducting Prevention Interviews could be improved? Free-report responses were encouraged, with no

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restrictions on word count. Demographic information was also sought, in addition to questions relating to position, experience, and training related to Prevention Interviews.

Respondents

192 respondents consented to take part; of these 92 were responsible for conducting Prevention Interviews or overseeing the team responsible, and of these 33 completed the survey. One respondent chose not to specify their gender; of the remaining 32 it was an equal divide of 16 males and 16 females. Overall, 9 different Police services were represented, with 36% of responses coming from the Metropolitan police and 39% from West Yorkshire. Out of these Police services, 76% of respondents stated their rank was Police Constable. In terms of time spent in the police, it ranged from 11 months to 35 years, the average number of years being 12. The range of Prevention Interviews conducted in the last 12 months ranged from 2 up to 65, the average number being 21 Prevention Interviews. When asked when respondents last received training to conduct effective Prevention Interviews, 52% responded "never". Of the remaining 48%, time since training was spread evenly between 0-6 months, 6-12 months, 12-18 months, and more than 2 years ago.

Analysis strategy

A qualitative design was adopted to allow for rich and in-depth data to be collected and analysed. Specifically, Inductive Thematic Analysis (Patton, 1990) was used to identify common themes emerging from the data. This kind of analysis is data-driven, involving a process of coding the data and identifying themes without trying to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame, or the researcher's analytic preconceptions or subjective interpretations.

The initial stage of analysis involved identifying, and then coding, all of the different ideas, opinions, topics, and items of information that had been reported in the free recall responses across the six survey questions. These were then grouped into tentative themes and sub-themes according to commonalities. These themes were then once again reviewed against the original data to ensure they made sense, and that nothing had been missed. After final adjustments, each emergent theme was given a representative name.

Qualitative Results

The process of Inductive Thematic Analysis resulted in 14 distinct sub-themes, which were grouped into 5 key themes that were able to represent the core topics that the respondents chose to focus upon. The analysis was exhaustive in that of all the data extracted, the themes developed were represented in at least half of the questions asked.

Key themes

Where we refer to 'the majority of respondents' commenting on a theme or sub-theme, it can be assumed that at least 75% of the respondents expressed that view. If referring to 'some', 'many', or 'several', then approximately a third of the respondents expressed the view.

Please find an info-graphic of the key themes in Figure 1, and a discussion of each in turn on the subsequent pages.

FIGURE 1: THEMES & SUB-THEMES



1. The Missing Episode

Unsurprisingly, a strong theme throughout the data was information about the missing episode itself. The following three sub-themes emerged as the main reasons for conducting the Prevention Interviews, as well as being seen as key areas of enquiry that produce the most valuable information from the returned individuals.

The majority of respondents stated that they were keen to understand **'push and pull'** factors relating to why the person left; push factors being those the person is trying to distance themselves from, and pull factors being external draws towards something or someone; *"Were they running away from someone? Were they coerced into leaving or going somewhere?"* (Respondent no.24).

Prevention interviews were also used to discover whether the missing person had committed, witnessed, or been harmed from a **crime**. The importance of exploring Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) issues, and substance misuse, was mentioned by a large number of respondents. *"Establish if they have been the victim of crime or grooming."* (Respondent no. 8).

The final part of this theme considered the interviews as an opening for disclosure of information for **wider investigations**. For example, an investigation relating to the missing person, or relating to other investigations concerning people they may have disappeared with: *"illicit any intelligence that might assist in any criminal or other investigation."* (Respondent no. 4).

2. Preventing Subsequent Missing Episodes

Respondents frequently described Prevention Interview as being vital for **identifying potential risk factors** that may affect the likelihood of the individual going missing again. The importance of understanding reasons as to why they left was voiced *"...as they will continue to leave unless this is looked into and helped/solved regardless of where they are going."* (Respondent no. 1). This information can then be used in an attempt to prevent further missing episodes; *"ensure a Risk Management Plan (trigger plan) is put into place to safeguard if the person is likely to go missing again."* (Respondent no. 4).

Many respondents also spoke of the importance of **eliciting personal information** that may help trace the person should there be a future missing episode, for example, phone numbers, oyster card details, associates' names and addresses, and places the missing person finds themselves in were all identified as useful; *"Names and addresses of frequented places. Names and numbers of people they were with."* (Respondent no. 7).

Several respondents described the importance of recording the information elicited on their **Missing Persons database**, not only for current investigations but also to improve missing persons investigations in the future; *"Place it onto our missing system Compact to help with other missing incidents."* (Respondent no. 1).

3. Engaging with the returned person

Many respondents discussed the relationship between the officer and the returned person, commenting that engagement and cooperation were vital for a successful Prevention Interview. Two sub-themes emerged:

The importance of **building trust and rapport** with the returned person was frequently mentioned, and by a large number of respondents. *"It is essential that the person is put in a position where they feel they can talk to you and if they want to disclose something to you then they aren't being judged or criticised."* (Respondent no. 3). Related to this, creating a safe and confidential space so that the returned person feels comfortable talking about the missing episode was mentioned by 4 respondents. *"Giving adults/children a safe, confidential space to discuss the missing episode and to safeguard as needed."* (Respondent no. 2). Ways in which the interview could be improved was also discussed, with similar suggestions made about the importance of building trust and rapport; *"Better interview techniques. Deformalise the encounter. Sitting with them. Making them feel valued as a person. Spending time talking about their wants and needs."* (Respondent no. 9).

Conversely, many respondents talked about a **lack of cooperation** from the returned person when trying to engage with them for the purpose of completing the Prevention Interview. Common frustrations included situations when the person does not want to answer any questions. On occasion, officers had even received abuse from the returned person. Some respondents reported that they continue to offer advice to the missing person even if there is a failure to cooperate. However, this was often thought to be ignored or met with indifference, with the following quote representing a commonly cited frustration; *"Missing persons choosing to ignore advice. Being blasé about the risks they are putting themselves in and not taking responsibility for their actions."* (Respondent no. 17). In the absence of cooperation, respondents stated that approach other sources to obtain information, such as friends of the missing person or other agency professionals.

4. Issues and challenges

The respondents were often in agreement when identifying issues and challenges relating to their ability to conduct successful Prevention Interviews, leading to three sub-themes being identified;

The issue of **time** was mentioned by around half of respondents, and approximately 12% saying that they felt pressured to conduct Prevention Interviews as soon as possible or within a certain timeframe (e.g., within 72 hours). Related to this, some voiced concerns that there isn't enough time to conduct the interviews effectively, while other respondents suggested the interviews needed to be completed faster; *"They should be completed more quickly."* (Respondent no. 9). Related to this, some respondents felt frustrated that some Prevention Interviews were being conducted unnecessarily; *"Doing them unnecessarily – even when the person has been to the shop but is reported missing and then returns shortly after a return interview is usually requested to record no information of relevance. It needs to be on a case by case risk basis rather than all people regardless of the circumstances."* (Respondent no. 18).

Another issue related to inconsistencies of the **structure and procedure** of the Prevention Interview, with some respondents using a standardised set of questions, some using a partial set of questions (those necessary to complete the found report), and some with no pre-set questions at all. Whilst only explicitly expressed by one respondent when suggesting improvements, there was a general sense of

wanting clarity in relation to the procedure. Additionally, while some respondents talked of conducting Prevention Interviews with all returned persons, others only have procedures in place for interviewing returned children; *"Adults have no such follow up return interview – this is something we are working on improving."* (Respondent no. 14).

A final resource-issue raised related to the lack of **training** given to conduct effective Prevention Interviews. Some respondents also spoke of having too little interview training in general; *"I have never had official training, just familiarization from specialist units."* (Respondent no. 19), and *"I cannot recall the last time I received specific training on conducting Prevention Interviews."* (Respondent no. 31).

5. Recommendations suggested by the respondents

In response to the frustration experienced when returned persons don't want to engage with the police, many respondents acknowledged the value having other agencies involved. In particular, respondents were often in agreement that children might cooperate better with someone from relevant social care agencies, with a smaller number of respondents making similar remarks about adult social care agencies. Having an effective **information-sharing** agreement, whereby external agencies were also able to conduct Prevention Interviews was also considered positive in that it would free up police-resources; *"The Police are stretched to the limit..."* (Respondent no. 18). Examples were given highlighting the value of information sharing. One respondent believed that repeated exposure to the police can be bad, and suggesting that if another professional is able to conduct the interviews, then they should.

In response to the number of Prevention Interviews being conducted drawing upon limited police resources, respondents talked of introducing a **risk-related response**, whereby interviews are conducted differently according to the level of assumed risk. Where cases are deemed low or medium risk, it was suggested that an interview via phone or Skype, with either the professional carer or the returned person, could save time. This would also enable a much faster response to conduct face-to-face interviews with high-risk cases.

A final practical recommendation voiced by a number of respondents was to increase the number of **characters available on Merlin** to allow a thorough debrief to be recorded; *"The lack of characters on Merlin...sometimes the interview write-ups can be lengthy. Merlin does not allow this and so opportunities and details are being missed."* (Respondent no. 7).

6. Summary and Conclusion

This research was conducted to investigate the consistency of practice and the use of frameworks for police-led, prevention interviews in missing persons episodes. 75% of the respondents were from two large metropolitan police forces and 76% of respondents were constables providing an essentially practitioner view of the issues.

Despite good intentions and best endeavours from police officers, it is clear that there are a number of constraints limiting the value of prevention interviews. These constraints include the lack of guidance around the conduct of interviews; lack of training to implement the interviews satisfactorily; and availability of officer time.

Four other themes emerged from the research, although two can be combined as they relate to the reasons for the conduct of prevention interviews. The reasons can be summarised as the seeking of

causal and risk factors, establishing harm and to elicit disclosures, as well as to ensure the reduction of repeat episodes and to record any revealed information in case management systems.

Engagement with the returned missing person is seen as an important function of the interview process to build trust and rapport but at the same time many respondents talked through the lack of co-operation from the returned person which disabled the interview.

Information sharing agreements are seen as a crucial device and should be an integral part of any local protocols between police and other safeguarding agencies.

Next steps should include defining a structure and procedure, following the principles of investigative interviewing, for prevention interviews. Training for those responsible for the conduct of interviews would embed effectively any guidance produced. Allowing other trusted professionals in partner agencies to conduct prevention interviews may alleviate resource and time constraints in policing. Part of this work is already in progress.

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