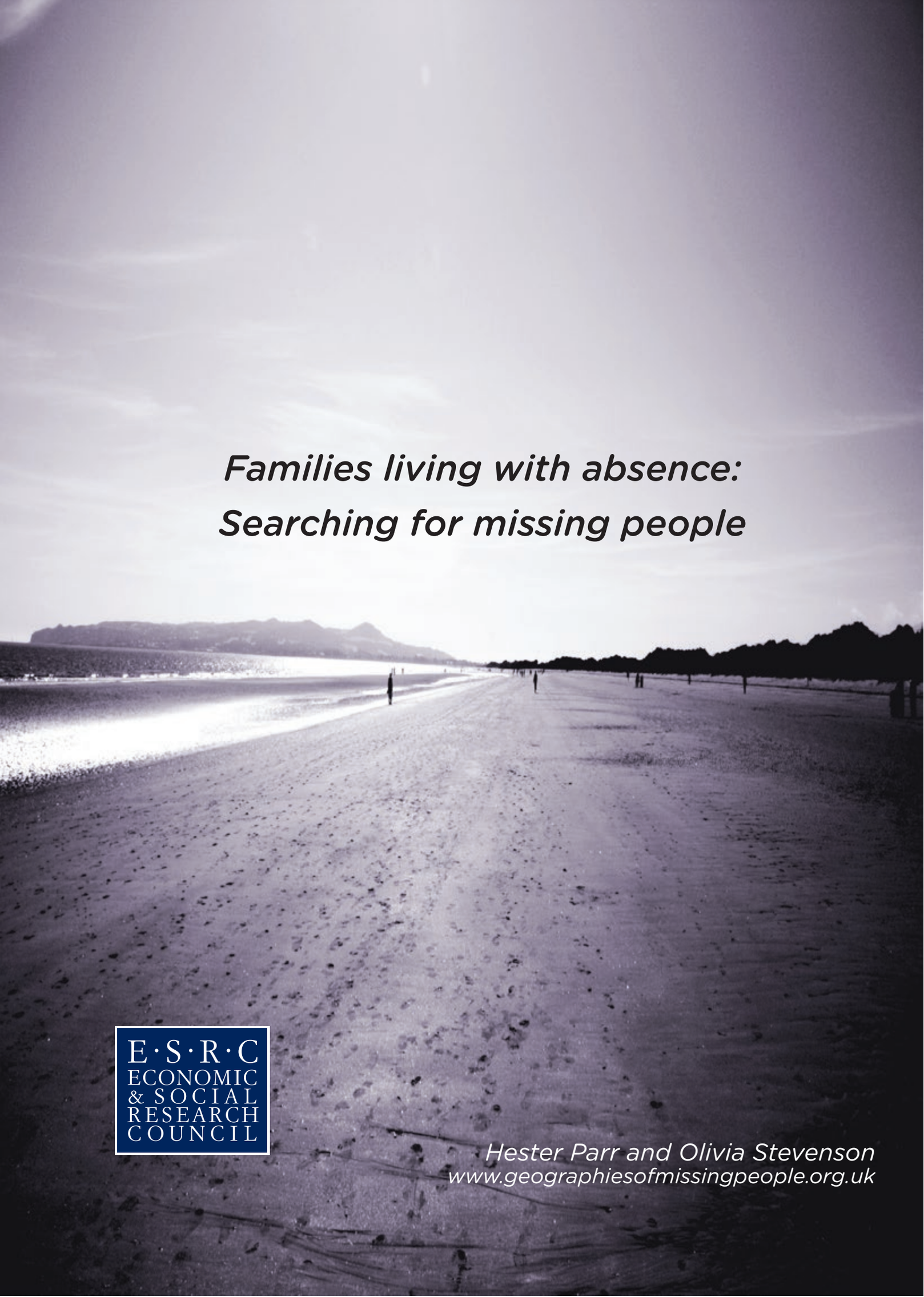

Families living with absence: Searching for missing people

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Hester Parr and Olivia Stevenson
www.geographiesofmissingpeople.org.uk

Families living with absence: Searching for missing people

2013

Hester Parr and Olivia Stevenson

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FOREWORD

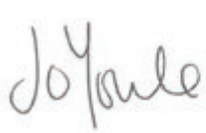
For more than 20 years the charity Missing People has been supporting families who are missing someone. Over time we have deepened our knowledge of how it feels for a family to miss someone and face the devastation of not knowing where they are and if they are well. Research is such a vital way to promote understanding and *The Geographies of Missing People* project has provided valuable insight into the experience of losing someone special, and living with this loss. I wholeheartedly welcome and commend this research.

The report raises many relevant issues for working with families of missing people, but also highlights the need for families to have time and space to remember. This is something we at Missing People have been exploring over recent years, and this report takes us a long way towards better understanding how we might meet this need in new ways.

We are grateful to the families who took part in the research and for sharing something so personal for the benefit of others. This openness and generosity during a time of great and on-going distress is an admirable gift to others in need.

This report, and its recommendations, will help all of us working with and supporting families of missing people by helping to ground us in the reality of how it feels to lose someone and not know where they are. It has immediate relevance and utility in evidence-based operational police practice, and in the work of the charity and other partners. I pledge that at Missing People we will hear the messages in this report from the families and work with its recommendations. We will embed these in our understanding, our practice, our communication and our development of services.

I hope that the families who read this report will know that they have been listened to. I hope that over time their 'messages', so well represented in the report, will improve practice for them, and for any of us who in the future may face the despair of a missing situation. I hope that they will feel less alone as a result of this work.



Jo Youle
Chief Executive
http://www.missingpeople.org.uk

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr Hester Parr is the Principal Investigator for the Geographies of Missing People research project. She has published for over twenty years on questions of mental health, mental illness and human geography. She is the author of Mental Health and Social Space: Geographies of Inclusion? (Blackwell, Oxford, 2008). She has written on 'Missing Geographies' (co-authored with Fyfe) in Progress in Human Geography (2012), as well as 'Geographies of Missing People: processes, experiences, responses' (co-authored with Stevenson, Woolnough and Fyfe) and 'Missing People, Missing Voices: Stories of Missing Experience' (co-authored with Stevenson); and both of the latter resources are available from the project website: www.geographiesofmissingpeople.org.uk

Dr Olivia Stevenson is a human geography Research Fellow. She has an expertise in creative methods, working with vulnerable populations and has previously undertaken research in homes with families on issues of technology use. Currently she is the Research Fellow for the award-winning, ESRC-funded project 'Geographies of Missing People: processes, experiences, responses'. In addition to her work on missing geographies, one of her main areas of interest is the geographies of suicide. Olivia is a guest editor of the forthcoming Social and Cultural Geography special issue 'Geographies of Dying and Death' (with Kenten and Maddrell) and is a co-author of the two reports cited.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The 'Geographies of Missing People: processes, experience and responses' project, from which this report is generated, is funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) (Ref 062–232–492) and is a partnership between the Universities of Glasgow and Dundee, the Scottish Institute for Policing Research and Police Scotland. The team has worked in collaboration with the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS), the UK Missing Persons Bureau (Serious Organised Crime Agency) and the charity Missing People.

The authors wish to thank the families who participated in interviews – for their openness, generosity and willingness to share their experiences – without them this research would not have been possible.

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Martin Muir (www.academicdigital.co.uk) helped to prepare this report for print and also provided photography and web support.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

The ESRC funded (Ref 062–232–492) Geographies of Missing People research project, of which this report is part, has been designed with the support of both charitable and police partnerships, the UK charity Missing People, Police Scotland and the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS). This report is structured as a response to the content of twenty-five in-depth interviews and a focus group with families of missing people, concentrating on their experience of searching for their missing relatives. This report introduces a new language around missing issues, see pg 19 for an explanation. For more information on the ethical and methodological aspects of this study, see technical appendix and for further information on the project, visit: www.geographiesofmissingpeople.org.uk.

THE FAMILIES

Twenty-five families took part in the research and are represented in this report through pseudonyms, so as to protect their identities. The families have a diverse range of missing experience. The interviewees are dominated by people who have had a family member missing for a relatively long time period and the majority of interviewees were parents of adult missing children, see Table one, pg 19, for further details.

THE REPORT: ITS STRUCTURE AND PURPOSE

This report elaborates some aspects of the qualitative interviews undertaken with the twenty-five families, but adopts a deliberate emphasis on questions of search, communications and actions that take place around search and in partnership with police services. The report is also informed by the small literature that has emerged around about families of people who have been reported missing (Boss, 1999; Boss and Carnes, 2012; Edkins, 2011, 2013; Holmes, 2008; Wayland, 2007, 2013). The overall intention of the research is to create space for the development of new resources around missing issues, with direct reference to the people who experience its profound effects. The purpose of the report is thus to share words of experience and to prompt further conversations amongst multiple interest groups.

KEY FINDINGS

The research has identified key aspects of the experiences of families who live with missing situations. The findings emphasise the experience of searching for missing adults both with and without police liaison, with a view to providing practical insights for those having a professional responsibility for and to missing families. The key components of the report are summarised below:

Reporting people missing and experiencing initial search

- For families, the decision to report an adult missing is fraught with anxieties around *if, whom* and at *what stage* in the disappearance to make the report.
- Families may mount significant searches of their own before reporting a loved one missing.
- Families are met with a varied response by the public and police when reporting their person missing.
- When first reporting a family member missing to the police, families feel most reassured when an empathetic response-based approach is taken.

Police search and family liaison

- A speedy and positive response by the police at the initial stages of the investigation produces long-lasting positive family-police relationships.
- The majority of families engage in some form of search alongside or in response to police search.
- Family members are happy to aid police investigations, especially if they understand the relevance of questioning in relation to developing search parameters.
- Empathetic police questioning aimed at harnessing details of likely 'where' scenarios are often received positively and enable further possibilities for search locations.
- Where clear understandings of police search decision-making are communicated, a positive perception of the police and investigative team is expressed.
- Communications between families of missing people and the police are extremely variable with most families experiencing non-systematic communication pathways, which compromise police-family relations and occasionally lead to a complete breakdown in communications.

Character witnessing and police relations

- Positive response by police to a family's character witness of their missing relative during the initial stages of an investigation are critical in the development of subsequent trustful relations between police and families.
- Partnership working in missing investigations between police and families is often limited.
- Some families experience significant problems in getting police officers to take seriously their knowledge of the character, known preferences, routines and habits of their missing person.

- Families express a perception of gender bias as a barrier to effective response when reporting young men missing.

Communication between families and police

- When a lack of communication occurs, this leads families to perceive poor standards in policing, including a belief that police lack missing persons training.
- Good family-police liaison is achieved by sensitive handling of personal effects, use of reassuring and empathetic language and clear and regular communications.

Communication with other agencies

- Families report a lack of awareness of relevant partnership agencies with whom they may work with in searching for missing relatives.
- Families recognise that other services, such as mental health care teams, may hold relevant information for search, but they report barriers to securing such information because of data protection laws.

Liaising with the UK Missing People charity

- Families who have engaged with the UK charity Missing People report that their services are extremely helpful, but not all families are aware of this agency in some regions.
- For some, there is a false perception that the charity only supports those in longer-term missing situations. Some families, therefore, have not recognised their missing situation as 'authentic', which has stopped them from engaging with the charity at first.
- For those families who have had contact, they highly value the opportunity to talk with trained Missing People staff via their 24 hour helpline and have access to expertise and support.
- Families report that working with the charity for search functions like poster campaigns and media appeals have been processes that have helped them to feel like active partners in managing their missing situations.
- The charity acts as a valuable 'information broker' between families and the police. Families welcome this function and a regular flow of information from an independent body, as it has helped them to manage their emotions at a stressful time.
- Families of missing people welcome the chance to network face-to-face with other families in similar situations, and appreciate the facilitation offered by the charity.

Families search strategies and practices over time

- Families engage in a range of search activities that can last for many years, but may also change over time, including physical search, documentary/virtual search; social networking search; and liaison with expert agencies and professional bodies.

- Search is carried out in partnership with the police, but where poor police relationships or conflict occurs, families feel that they have to organise search for themselves.
- Search is emotionally exhausting and can become extremely difficult to sustain and families feel that there is limited support available to help with a transition from physical search to 'looking' and 'remembering'.

Geographical imagination

- Asking 'where?' (where are they now?) is a painful question for many families, and yet one that they can ask themselves many times.
- Geographical imaginations of 'where?' can relate to the pragmatic process of search and police liaison, but also can lead families to revision why the absence occurred and for what purpose.
- Missing experience can be associated with a range of landscapes that are connected to a range of emotions for those left behind.

Coping with returns

- The return of their missing family member is a key focus of anticipatory hope for many.
- There is perceived to be limited support available to families to aid reconnection and return.
- Communities are often ill-equipped to deal with returns in missing situations, and this is partly because there is a lack of public discussion around missing issues.
- Missing people's rights to privacy can be diminished during the search process. On their return, the local community may be aware of the details of a disappearance and that can feel hard for them to manage.
- In cases where a return has happened, families report that related conversations rarely move beyond initial questions which did not address or reference the deep experience or cause of absence.
- Families can struggle to cope with the minimal information provided by police during conversations about return, notably when return to the family or family home is not secured.

Community/local social network reactions and support

- Families experience mixed reactions to and support for their missing situations in their communities and via local social networks.
- Community silence or avoidance is perceived by families to be a way of conveying judgment about them, causing some to move locale in long term cases.
- Limited shared language exists around human absence, and families find it hard to talk about their missing situations.
- Where conversation does occur families value sensitive, but direct communication that extends beyond a cursory enquiry, but which does not suggest 'moving on'.
- Families find informal support from friends, family and colleagues to be enormously comforting and the process of talking extremely helpful.

Living with missing experience

- As the potential for new search leads may diminish, senses of ambiguity remain strong and so does the need for resolution.
- Families long for some form of communication that would allow them to transition from an 'ambiguous loss' to 'coping' with absence.
- Families develop a range of strategies that help them 'live alongside' the absence.
- For some families in long term missing situations the ambiguity of 'not knowing' morphs into an 'everyday remembrance' lived out through muted practices of 'looking'.
- The impacts of having a loved one go missing are considerable, ranging from emotional disturbance and psychological pain to physical pain or symptoms.
- There are few options offering dedicated therapeutic support for families of missing people. The latter express the need for more formal sources of support or talking therapies to help them in managing their loss.
- As the missing situation continues, the feelings experienced do not get easier, but families find different ways to cope and move forward from initial states of helplessness.
- Families who have engaged with the UK charity Missing People report being better able to cope with ambiguous loss.

Constructing 'durable biographies' of missing people?

- In long-term missing situations, it is often the case that there is a strongly felt need to 'redefine life around the trauma' rather than 'survive the experience' (Morell, 2011: 21).
- Families find ways of living with absence in a manner that allows them to still discuss and to retain the essence or the character of their missing loved one.
- The establishment of 'durable characterful biographies' (Walters, 1996) could lead to the creation of an adequate space of recognition for the missing, as well as to aid talk of them.
- There is a need to find more collective ways of valuing and responding to uncertain, missing biographies.
- Forms of storytelling, photography or film, or specially held events may allow a celebration of the missing person's biography *so far* and as part of an on-going family narrative.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

We write this report and signal its recommendations in the hope that the words of family members as stated here can be productively drawn upon in both police and charitable educational and operational initiatives. We also offer some academic ideas in the report, in the hope that such ideas may offer new ways to regard and act around missing loss. The findings from the report suggest multiple learning points, and calls for further action:

Learning points

- Good practice examples of partnership working in missing investigations should be shared via police education and training.
- It should be recognised that regular communication and updates via the use of single points of contact or Family Liasion Officers (FLOs) constitute best practice in missing person enquiries.
- Police officers should agree regular call times for news sharing with families, and in long-term cases, they should call every few months for updates and information sharing.
- Working in partnership with families can produce benefit and value-added to police investigations and working with families should be more than 'managing expectations'.
- Families need to understand that their witness statement has been well recorded and valued by investigating officers. The police have a duty of care to explain the purpose of witness statements and how they have been properly handled.
- The Missing People charity should continue to provide a range of advice literature for families about emotional and practical support services, but increase provision about planning for return/reconnection and memory work.

Recommendations

- Consultation with families of missing people should be at the heart of service development and planning in relation to missing issues and guidance.
- The police have a role in reducing experiences of trauma in missing situations by promoting family partnership work and new guidance could take account of this role.
- Police and family investigation strategies should be managed in relation to one another and not just in parallel.
- Police officers should plan for medium and long-term missing investigations to involve a sharing of search tasks with families as part of active partnership work.
- Provision of empathetic and clear communication and liaison pathways between the police and families of missing people is a key area in need of standardisation and improvement in the UK.
- Families in medium and long-term cases should be notified when officers change on the case and should be introduced to new officers in a professional hand-over.

- The appointment of local force ‘champions’ for long-term cases of missing people can act in the interest of the family and promote local investment in case resolution.
- The Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO), the UK Missing Person Bureau, and Police Scotland should encourage police forces to inform the family members of missing people about the range of support services available to them as standard.
- Police officers could be required to carry an ‘aide memoire’ of best practice in missing person cases, and the above agencies should evaluate this option.
- The Missing People charity could increase awareness of its services by campaigning for police use of an ‘aide memoire’ that requires all officers to pass on the details of the charity in each missing persons case.
- The Missing People charity could invest in on-going research relationships that explore further the memory practices and experiences of living with missing loss, amongst families of missing people.

CONTENT AND CONTEXT

INTRODUCTION

"This kind of thing can happen to the most normal, the most ordinary families, something just comes like a bolt of lightning" (Gail).

"His last words to us were 'I'm off, see you tonight' " (Charlotte).

This report draws on interviews with twenty-five members of families of missing adult people (eighteen years plus) who were contacted through the database of two police forces (Grampian region in Police Scotland and Metropolitan Police Service in London) and the UK Missing People charity (see technical appendix). The report is structured as a response to the content of these interviews, with a focus on the experience of searching for missing people with and without police liaison. The interviews were conducted as part of a larger ESRC funded (Ref 062–232–492) *Geographies of Missing People* research project, and families were interviewed with a semi-structured research schedule (see technical appendix), reflecting the concerns of an interdisciplinary academic-police research team that wanted to collect data on the search experiences of families. In the larger research project the team have also interviewed people reported as missing and who have returned (Stevenson, Parr, Woolnough and Fyfe, 2013) and police officers involved in searching for missing people (Fyfe, Stevenson and

Woolnough, 2013). The three groups that form the empirical heart of this research project - people reported as missing, families of missing people and police officers with experience of search for missing people - have been interviewed for their verbatim views and opinions about what are the most salient aspects of missing experience, and how best others might act around these aspects in the future and in order to improve how both services (the police and charities) and wider society might respond to human absence.

The words cited above from Gail and Charlotte, both mothers of adult missing children, give a sense of the profound rupture that having a missing family member involves. As Gail indicates, missing experience is not something that only particular kinds of families from particular places experience (although social and economic deprivation may be one driver for absence), but rather something that can happen to anyone, any ordinary family. To have a family member go missing is one of the most shocking of human experiences that we might endure, especially when that absence goes on for months and years. This report explores some key dimensions to that experience, not only in terms of the emotional consequences of such absence, but also in terms of what families say of their experience of searching, and also of their experience of communicating with police officers about that search. It is our suggestion that how search happens, and how search is communicated within and between the police service and families of missing people, has a very important role to play in the emotional consequences of missing experiences for families.

The qualitative data reported in the following pages are being utilised in police education and training seminars, and also in conference and workshop settings with the Missing People charity and families. It is often difficult to know how to talk about missing experience, especially that which goes on for a long time. We hope that this report will provide new resources that might help to end this silence.

THE FAMILIES

The families who took part in the research are represented here by pseudonyms, so as to protect their identities. The twenty-five families have a diverse range of missing experience. Table one on page 19 summarises the relationship between the interviewee and the person reported as missing, and indicates whether they have been found and the duration of being missing. As demonstrated, the interviewees are dominated by people who have had a family member missing for a relatively long time period, although four families experienced an absence of under twenty-four hours. Two families experienced a twenty-four hour absence, four families a twenty-four hour to seven day absence; three families between one to four weeks; eight families an absence of one to ten years; three families an absence lasting between ten to twenty years; and one family an absence of over twenty years.

Table one (pg 19) also has a column showing which types of search had been conducted by families, summarised as PS = Physical Search, DV = Documentary and Virtual Search, SN = Social Networks

Search and CS = Charitable Search. These search categories are ones that we explore later in the report and in respect to Table two on page 53, although it is clear from this table that most families are engaged in diverse kinds of actions through which they try to locate their family member or news of them.

THE REPORT: ITS STRUCTURE AND PURPOSE

The report elaborates some aspects of the qualitative interviews undertaken with the twenty-five families, but with a deliberate emphasis on questions about search, communications and actions that take place around search and in partnership with police services. The report is informed by the small literature that has emerged about families of people who have been reported missing (Boss, 1999; Boss and Carnes, 2012; Edkins, 2011, 2013; Holmes, 2008; Wayland, 2007, 2013). We do not elaborate this literature here, but in section twelve we draw on some aspects of it more explicitly as a way to begin reflecting on what families have said about their experiences. For further academic discussion and reference to literature on the experiences of missing absence, see Parr and Stevenson (forthcoming, 2014).

In sections one to four we summarise what families had to say about:

- **Reporting people missing and experiencing initial search.**
- **Police search and family liaison.**
- **Character witnessing and police relations.**
- **Communication between families and police.**

In these sections, we are exploring the relationship between families and the police, and relating what interviewees had to say about the communications which occurred around search activity, and how these communications impacted upon their understanding of the absence of their missing person.

In sections five and six, we explore how families turn to other agents and agencies in their search for missing relatives:

- **Communication with other agencies.**
- **Liaising with the UK Missing People charity.**

Here in particular we learn what families say about the role of the UK Missing People charity and the difference that this makes to their experience of search and missingness.

In sections seven to ten, we explore further what families say about their own search strategies:

- **Families search strategies and practices over time.**
- **Geographical imagination**
- **Coping with returns.**
- **Community/local social network reactions and support.**

In these sections, we learn how search strategies are bound up with particular imaginations of where their family member might have gone. These themes are contextualised by family reflections on what happens when the missing person returns, or on how families imagine a return. The role of the local community

and social networks is critical in how families cope with search and return, and this section examines what families say about how communities respond to missing absence.

In the final sections eleven and twelve, we focus on:

- **Living with missing experience.**
- **Constructing 'durable biographies' of missing people?**

In these sections, we offer some interpretations of what families say about the reality of living with missing experience, and we bring to bear some academic ideas to suggest what might assist with the seemingly unbearable burden of carrying on when a loved one is missing. In section twelve, we suggest that the concept of 'durable biography' (Walters, 1996) is helpful when trying to envisage ways in which to witness and hence retain a hold on the unique characters of individual missing people.

The report ends with section thirteen:

- **Recommendations and further research.**

We write this report and signal its recommendations in the hope that the words of family members reported here can be productively drawn upon in both police and charitable education and operational initiatives. We offer some academic ideas in the report also in the hope that these offer new ways to regard and act around missing loss. Whilst these will not straightforwardly offer ways in which it is possible to diminish the pain that many families feel, they suggest ways to continue the conversation about those who are not currently present. Talking about those who are missing, and communicating around search for missing people assists in ending misunderstandings and addressing any silence around such concerns. The purpose of the report is thus to share words of experience and prompt further conversations amongst multiple interest groups.

LANGUAGE

In this report we experiment with a new kind of language surrounding missing people and the changed social relations that such human absence can produce. We deliberately use phrases like 'missing experiences' to indicate the complex experiences of people related to those who have gone missing. We reference phrases like 'missing loss' to signal the particular senses of loss that families of missing people may experience. 'Missing situations' is a phrase indicating the range of people and processes that may be involved in different ways once a human absence is noted. 'Missing awareness' refers to public awareness of missing people and the 'missing issues' that relate to them. 'Missing absence' is a reference to human absence that is defined and constituted by missing persons enquiries. This language suggests that a new vocabulary around missing people may be helpful in understanding more about the issue.

Table one: Family representatives and their missing member profiles

Family member (reporting)	Relative missing	Gender and age	Family search type	Missing duration and status
Peter	Son	Male 50-60 yrs	PS and SN	Several hours (returned, repeatedly missing)
Gail	Daughter	Female 20-30yrs	PS and SN	3 hours (returned)
Naomi	Sister	Female (age not known)	PS and SN	6 hours (returned, repeatedly missing)
Jack	Brother	Male 50-60 yrs	PS and SN	6-12 hours (returned, repeatedly missing)
Eithne	Son	Male 40-50 yrs	DV	24 hours (returned)
Lynsey	Brother	Male 20-30 yrs	PS and DV	24 hours (returned)
Fay	Sister	Female (age unknown)	PS and CS	36 hours (returned, now deceased)
Adrian	Daughter	Female 20-30yrs	PS and SN	48 hours (returned, repeatedly missing)
Pauline	Son	Male 40-50 yrs	PS and DV	2-4 days (returned, repeatedly missing)
Samantha	Sister	Female 50-60 yrs	PS	24 hours – week (returned, repeatedly missing)
Sally	Father	Male 60-70 yrs	PS; DV; CS	1 week (returned)
Aileen	Brother	Male 30-40 yrs	DV and CS	2-3 weeks (located but not returned)
Patrick	Sister	Female (age unknown)	DV; SN; CS	3-4 weeks (found deceased)
Charles and Laura	Son	Male 20-30 yrs	CS; DV; PS; SN	2 years (still missing)
Sasha	Husband	Males 50-60 yrs	PS; DV; CS	2 years (still missing)
Judy	Son	Male 20-30 yrs	PS; DV; SN; CS	2 years (still missing)
Raquelle	Sister	Female 30-40 yrs	PS; DV; CS	3 years (still missing)
Charlotte and Ray	Son	Male 18 yrs	PS; DV; SN; CS; other	3 years (still missing)
Paul	Father	Male 80-90 yrs	DV; SN; CS	3 years (still missing)
Alice	Step-mother	Female 90 yrs+	'Looking' not searching	5 years (still missing)
Tina	Son	Male 20-30 yrs	PS; DV; SN; CS	6 years (found deceased)
Jay	Brother	Male 20-30 yrs	PS; DV; SN; CS	17 years (still missing)
Gladys	Husband	Male 40-50 yrs	CS; DV; PS; SN	20 years (still missing)
Misha	Son	Male 20-30 yrs	PS; DV; SN; CS; other	20 years (still missing)
Daniela	Son	Male 20-30 yrs	PS; CS; DV; other	22 years (still missing)

Key: PS = Physical Search, DV = Documentary and Virtual Search, SN = Social Networks Search, CS = Charitable Search

SECTION 1

Reporting people missing and experiencing initial search

Defining a person as missing is situational, in that to be 'missing' a person or thing needs to be missed. Current understandings of missing are therefore highly dependent on those left behind (but see Parr and Stevenson, 2013). The decision to report an adult missing is fraught with emotional complexities around an individual's right to go missing and a desire to know the whereabouts of a missing family member, as Aileen described:

> *"I always felt my brother would be horrified to know that he's been reported missing for a start, because he probably won't consider himself missing. He'll consider 'right, I've had enough of there, I'm off'. Which, there's no law against that, he's free to do that"* (Aileen).

Once a family members' absence is reported to the police, this triggers official investigative procedures, which can leave some families unsure about what they should do and also whether their missing family member will appreciate the police intervention that a missing persons' report might bring. This is especially the case for families whose missing member is experiencing mental health problems, and where police intervention may result in a medical and legal process, such as a Mental Health Section. Some families have clearly struggled in such circumstances about whether and when to report the absence, with some families recalling instances where they may have mounted significant searches of their own before calling in police assistance, especially in cases

of repeated disappearance. For other families, a lack of knowledge of when and how to report someone missing compounded the distressing nature of the initial stages:

> *"The police actually said to us 'why did you leave it so long to contact us?' and I'm thinking 'I thought they had to be missing at least forty-eight hours' and he said 'no its a misconception, you know, if somebody isn't very well or has some kind of problems you can get in touch with us in a couple of hours if you are concerned' "* (Judy).

Decision making around whether to report a person missing is complex. Not only is it based on decisions around if and to whom to report a person missing, but also at what stage. For the police, the first twenty-four hours after a person has last been seen are vital to the investigation, but barriers exist that prevent reports being filed, broadly relating to a lack of knowledge of the process, as Judy relates above. Deciding if a person may be missing is complicated and families do not always feel qualified to make this decision alone. Quite often the decision to report a family member as missing takes place in conjunction with, or is prompted by, conversations with agencies and other family members, as further described by Judy:

> *"He had been under the mental health crisis team locally - I phoned the crisis team and said there had been this thing and he hadn't turned up. Told them the background from when he left the day before and they said 'If you think he is missing then you need to phone the police' and so just as I was thinking about that my eldest son came home to see if I was alright and he said 'yes you have got to get in touch with the police' "* (Judy).

At the early stages of considering if a disappearance has occurred, it may be that conversations take place with others to ascertain an appropriate response. Some interviewees report barriers to accessing support during such early stages, as Eithne explained:

> *"At [the] airport there was nobody to speak to. There wasn't anybody at any desks and I had broke down and said 'my son's missing'. And because he's an adult they wouldn't pay any attention to you. There wasn't anybody to talk to, really. There was nobody at the information desks, and then I stormed up to somebody and said 'I want the police, I want to report my son missing' and then the police came screeching in. And they were really good"* (Eithne).

Although the police are officially responsible for missing persons cases, a potential disappearance can be realised and responded to at anytime and anywhere, and so there is a need for missing awareness and procedures in a range of places. A limited awareness of missing situations within the general population, and of appropriate ways to respond to a family's cries for help, can add extra emotional anguish to an already traumatic situation and also create time delays.

Seeing signs

It is common for families of missing adults to reflect on the moments, hours and days before the disappearance. Reflection often centred on recalling the last interactions that family members had together as a way to identify possible reasons for the disappearance, the person's state of mind at the time and if they could have been prevented from leaving. Interviewees remembered varied indications that might be understood as signs of impending missingness, such as a suicide attempt, prolonged periods of depression, reduced family contact leading up to the disappearance, through to 'a look', as Gladys describes, when talking about the last time she saw her husband:

> *"When I look back on it, it was a very long look. A searching look, I would say. And he was looking directly into my eyes. It wasn't, as I say, until a couple of days later and I thought about that look, and you think he was just taking it in and realising he knew what he was doing. I'm sure at that point, that morning, he knew what he was doing. And that was it, that was his last look"* (Gladys).

Signs of impending missingness can be difficult to recognise and it is often only on reflection that families are aware of them. Even if they were picked up at the time, knowing how to respond to the risk of absence is a challenge, as there are limited tools available to know how to talk about or to address *potential* missing situations. Where repeated disappearance occurred, some families acknowledged how with time and experience they had developed an acute sense that allowed them to recognise signs of impending absence:

> *"Just being more aware, just being more alert, more aware and to take notice and see signs that she might do it again. But I knew that day that she would go missing, is that not funny? Because all the years' experience, because I then said I'll come down on Wednesday and whenever she didn't answer that I knew she was missing. You know what I mean? That's the way the patterns went and that's the thing that nobody would look for"* (Samantha).

As Samantha highlights, family members might hold important and intimate knowledge of the missing person's activities, habits and responses to crisis that are not always evident to others, even those involved in supportive care teams. Learning to recognise signs and feeling empowered to talk about potential missing situations could be an important step to help prevent a repeat disappearance. Families and adults reported as missing need support to achieve such recognition (and see Stevenson et al., 2013).

Call handlers

Reporting an adult missing to the police is a key step for families in defining their family member as a missing person. This decision is usually taken at a time of great emotional turmoil. Interviewees reflected on reporting their family member missing and on the initial phone conversations with call handlers. Conversations varied,

with some perceiving that their report was being given limited attention, but for others the experience was more positive:

> *"[The call handler was] very professional in the questions she asked me because my head was all over the place and she asked really precise questions, she focused me and that was good in that way, but also reassuring to tell me 'don't worry, we will send out the police now', you know, don't panic type of thing and 'just stay at home and don't go anywhere in case she comes back' "* (Gail).

> *"I got through to the call centre and the police were very helpful and the chap I spoke to was lovely and really concerned and he put everything in place straight away. Later on that day we had the police come round and take notes and that's how it all started"* (Judy).

For family members, feeling that their report was being taken seriously was critical to their initial experience of the police service, and the manner of the call handler was also central to their perception of whether the report was being taken seriously. Families felt most reassured when an empathetic response-based approach was taken by the call handler, which both empowered families to provide information, but let them know they were not alone in the search for their missing family member. Prompt action taken by the police was seen as a sign that a reported disappearance was being taken seriously.

Initial search

Once a missing person has been reported missing and the initial assessment recorded by a call handler, one of the first search actions by the police is to attend the home address of the missing person and to conduct a search of the premises and its environs. It is usual at this stage for an 'Open Door Search' (ACPO, 2010: 35) to be conducted. Open Door Searches are used where time is critical, as they provide an opportunity to quickly identify any information sources, such as diaries, notes, computers and phones that may lead to a person's discovery. ACPO (2010: 35) guidance states that 'judgements made at this point will have a significant effect on the effectiveness of the investigation'. In other words, those early searches are critical to providing information and intelligence that feed into the latter parts of an investigation. Although standard procedure, not all interviewees were visited for an initial search. For those interviewees who were visited, they reported how officers were explicit in explaining that one of the basic reasons for the visit is to establish whether a crime has been committed against the missing person, as Lynsey describes:

> *"I think he might have checked me and dad's rooms as well, because, this is slightly dark and disturbing, but if something like that happened, the police check. Apparently they're looking for a body in case me and dad, you know, killed him and tried to hide the body. I think I was told that's why they check all the rooms"* (Lynsey).

Although interviewees were, in the most part, very understanding of the need for a home search, their initial status as both potential suspects and information-givers, coupled with the disruptive reality of a police search, was nonetheless disturbing. Search therefore needs to be conducted with 'compassion towards the needs of the affected families and local communities' (ACPO, 2010: 35), as otherwise this can potentially have damaging effects on the police-family relationship.

SECTION 2
Police search and family liaison

The ACPO (2006: 94) guidance states that 'search is a routine element of investigating reports of missing persons. It involves making an assessment of what the initial enquiries suggest are the most likely circumstances of the person's disappearance, and then concentrating the search in accordance with those circumstances'. In operational terms: 'a missing person search not only involves looking for the missing person, but also for any evidence or intelligence that may be connected with them' (ACPO, 2006: 92).

The following section elaborates the family experience of these police activities and their understanding of the process as a result of family liaison. It should be noted that 'family liaison' is used here as a term to denote general communications between the police and the family, but we note that four family members also benefitted from a specific 'Family Liaison Officer' (FLO) and, where this is the case, we have made that fact clear below.

Positive experiences of search and liaison

Families of adults reported as missing often find themselves in a state of confusion and unsure how, and sometimes if, to carry out their own search related activities when faced with the devastating knowledge that a family member has gone missing. Interviewees reported that a speedy and thorough response to a missing

persons report by the police produced a real sense of positivity towards the police and from a family perspective this demonstrated a real commitment to finding their missing person. Several families reported feeling confident in the police as search experts, recognising that the police were the most effective means to locate their loved one, as a result of the knowledge and resources at their disposal to carry out effective searches, as summarised by Alice:

> *"They were very, very quick at getting searches up and running so there was no need for us to do anything like that. My nieces [...] said they wanted to search for her but we actually had discouraged them at that point mainly because, you know, there were a few things; the police were so good at getting in, we did say to them 'look, the police are the specialists, they know what they're looking for' "* (Alice).

For some family members, and Alice in particular, a thorough police search meant that no substantial family search took place. Indeed, Alice reports that her and her family engage in 'looking', as opposed to 'active searching', largely because they perceived their local police force to be doing absolutely everything that could be done in the circumstances. Perceiving the police as specialists in physical search may thus impact on a family's decision not to search in particular ways, although the majority of families did engage in some form of search alongside or in response to police search.

Police interviews and family experience of questioning

Police officers are tasked with gathering sufficient intelligence about a missing person with the view that this information will enable an effective and thorough investigation to be conducted (ACPO, 2010). One of the key tools to gather intelligence and build search is through interviews with family members and kinship networks of the missing person. This can mean that a single family member is repeatedly interviewed: *"Dad was interviewed quite a few times, he must have been interviewed about sixteen, seventeen times by them"* (Alice). It may be the case that, as the risk status of a person reported as missing changes or increases (see ACPO, 2013 for discussion of risk assessment), a family member might be interviewed repeatedly and by more specialised officers. As a result, family members can find it hard to keep track of both what they have been asked and the information that they have provided, as Alice comments:

> *"It starts to get muddy because you did tend to get interviewed quite a few times. We got interviewed by uniformed police that day, but then we had quite an in-depth conversation with CID later on in the process. So it does start to get a wee bit muddy as to what I was asked, when"* (Alice).

Interviewing the same person numerous times can leave that person confused as to what they have or have not said and about the questions that they were asked. However, where families could remember, they reported how police

questions contained useful prompts about typical routines and habits:

> *"It was very much a case of 'where do you think she could have gone?' It's amazing the things that come back when you start prompting. Things like 'where would she normally go shopping, would it be unusual for her to go anywhere else?' It was more about routines and things like that. To get a picture of what she was like and what she would normally do, as well as what the picture was with the family and the relationships and things like that. So yeah, it did feel very relevant"* (Alice).

Interviewees were happy to help the police when they understood the relevance of questions in developing the search parameters of the investigation. Interviewees reported that police questioning not only asked for a detailed description of the missing person and possible reasons for their disappearance, but also worked to identify possible locations based on past geographies:

> *"Their thought was, if she was in a confused state, she might go to somewhere that was memorable to her. So they were very much trying to identify key places in her life as to where they may be able to look for her"* (Alice).

Officers working with family members to harness their 'geographical imaginations' through sensitive questions based on likely 'where?' scenarios were received very positively, often prompting families to think laterally about their missing family member's geographical habits and preferences.

Family perspectives on the extent and geography of police search

Formal search protocol for missing persons cases suggests that search should be 'proportionate to the circumstances of disappearance' (ACPO, 2010: 35). Based on this understanding, police search for missing people clearly varies in type and extent. Some families reported feeling that the level of the police search was inadequate, whereas others reported a different experience:

> *"The police actually interviewed every bus driver in the area, both here and in the town. They literally interviewed every single driver. That's one thing that we can say, the police did not leave any stone unturned, even things that we would never have thought about"* (Alice).

Knowing what searches have been carried out and why is important in a family's understanding of how police-based missing persons investigations are managed, as is the feeling that the police have done all that they can to find their missing loved one. Knowing that 'no stone has been left unturned' in the search was said to be important for family's psychological recovery, serving to build positive perceptions of the local force and its reputation. Families reported that one of the key factors contributing towards a positive experience of police liaison lay in their clear understanding of police search decision-making and reasons for the parameters of the police search. Yet, for some interviewees who asked officers precise questions about the geography

of police search, they indicated being not fully appraised of all information:

> *"One of the things that I requested was the copy of the (search) map, because I was a teacher [...] and they went 'well nobody has asked for it before' and they've got the map here so I'm peering across the table upside down at the map and I'm saying 'well I really can't see' so I'd be turning it round like this and they'd be turning it back and saying 'it's our map'. So I said 'I'd really like a copy' and they went and did a copy in black and white. I was just furious. I said 'how dare you? Go and do a colour copy' so they did a colour copy but there was no key on it, there was no legend, so all their little crosses and colours didn't mean anything to me and the police officer who was explaining it couldn't interpret either. She said 'well we've done all of this' and I thought well it doesn't help me"* (Sasha).

Maps are an essential aid and record of a search as they readily depict exact locations, access and exit points and area, searched can be easily recorded and marked off. The mapping of search parameters, as a visual representation, is helpful in conveying to families the extent of and range of environments that have been search by the police. Some families are met with reluctance by officers to share technical or geographical details, and families can sometimes interpret this reluctance as a lack of engagement and effort in their missing person enquiry.

Communication

Families perceive that the primary function of the police in missing persons cases is to search for their missing member. They recognise that time spent communicating with them is time the police could be searching for their relatives. Despite this, families report the need for case information and search updates. Interviewees described communication pathways between families and the police as hugely variable, and that the quality of these tended to be dependent on individual officers and their approach to family liaison, as Sasha and Aileen indicate:

> *"I mean she would phone and text when she was on duty and if she was off duty she would arrange for another officer to phone, so the first fourteen days there was regular contact. When it handed over to [the next police force] the contact just disappeared completely"* (Sasha).

> *"I ended up phoning them every day, and after the third day or something, you know, sometimes it was different people and they would go 'oh, that was so and so that was dealing with that, I'll need to find out about that' and then they would say 'no, there's nothing to report'. So eventually after the third day I said 'listen, I hope I'm not being a pest by phoning every day, I hope you don't mind me phoning every day, but I'd rather do that than just be waiting and maybe one day someone will get back to me'. So that was how it went on. I felt that they had some empathy towards me"* (Aileen).

Interviewees report that regular and single-contact-point communication between the police and family members had an important impact on their overall perception of working with the police. For many families, however, non-systematic communication pathways or poor standards of communication was a reality:

> *"Different police officers [...] do their shift work don't they, and then we had someone else round and we had to sort of start again, you know. So there wasn't an easy reference to the case within the police department. I noticed that a couple of times"* (Adrian).

One consequence of not being fully informed of what is happening and having to chase varied police officers for news was that families were left with the impression that there was little co-ordination between police officers, whether or not this was actually the case, and that relationships could break down as a result. Where there are non-systematic communication pathways or poor standards of communication then the relationships between the police and families can become compromised. Families report feeling confused and frustrated over the lack of clarity with regards to who was in charge of the investigation and how the search was going. Sometimes, families were left with the impression that there was little co-ordination between individual police officers, the following quote being typical:

> *"There was no handover from one policeman to the next. One seemed to finish his shift and then it was somebody else. There was no continuity at all. And that was really bad. It was as if each person came along and did their little bit, so that was that. And there was no liaison between any of them through the whole episode. There was a total lack of liaison"* (Eithne).

Single points of contact were the most valuable in facilitating effective communication between family and police:

> *"You were repeating yourself over and over and [...] it did help once they gave me a named officer and said this officer has been allocated to your brother, you can contact him if you hear anything or you want to ask anything or whatever. So I felt a bit reassured, because obviously as time went on I was quite upset. Every day you're phoning, you're having to say 'my brother, he's a missing person' and go through the whole thing. So it was better when it was just one officer and it was mostly him that I spoke to after that, him and a sergeant"* (Alieen).

Breakdown in relationships

Relationships between police and families were variable across the twenty-five interviewees. Some tensions were reported as being bound up with a mismatch of expectations and performance in relation to information gathering and police search, and when families challenged officers on such matters, this occasionally led to a breakdown in communication, as was the case for Sasha:

> *"I just feel, and felt at the time,*

that their analysis was poor. I was expecting a more detailed analysis of what he was wearing and the circumstances and his situation more from them, and then the last bit of the discussion I had with the police officer was we agreed we wouldn't speak to each other, other than through email" (Sasha).

Many families felt the need for detailed police liaison and information about the search. For others, the lack of demonstrable search activity led to deep and resentful attitudes towards the police:

"The police, they like to be seen doing their job, but it's not offered to everybody, it's not. I mean an hours search for a young women, an hours search!, no heat seeking, there was no scuba sonar, we are not even one hundred percent sure whether there was even a lifeboat, they just combed the beach and said 'I don't know, we'll just leave it at that then shall we' and then three months later they asked my mum for some DNA, then we don't hear anything from them for two years. No, I don't have much faith in them at all, they haven't helped us one bit" (Raquelle).

Disillusionment with police search services is often bound up with the relationship work which surrounds such activity, and how the police are perceived to have responded to the family report and concerns about what happened to their relative.

SECTION 3
Character witnessing and police relations

In discussing their relationship and liaison with police officers, families elaborate crucial dimensions to this especially during the first stages of a missing person investigation. The ways in which families report the absence with reference to a discussion of the character of their missing person is critical to these first stages, and how the police respond to this character witness is critical in the subsequent trustful relations between police and families. Families emphasise that they are often more expert than the police in knowing what is or is not unusual behaviour for their family member:

> *"It was a case of 'she's not here, that's unusual, we have to get in touch with the police'. Like I said, because she was very much a creature of habit, her and my dad, you could set your watches by the pair of them"* (Alice).

For some families, this witness of habits and routines were well regarded and listened to by police officers, while for other families this became a source of tension, especially when the missing person had lived with alcohol and drug addictions:

> *"She just became a statistic, [...] she wasn't this girl next door that had a wonderful life and disappeared she didn't get the same kind of treatment as that sort of person, there was quite a few, I think there was one girl at the time that had disappeared as well, that had all*

the media attention, that had the police crawling over it but you get somebody with a mental health issue or struggles personally with their life, you get nothing, you get nothing because they are just a statistic, they're not worth it, a waste of space" (Raquelle).

Raquelle elaborates her feeling that her sister wasn't responded to by police officers, largely because of the lifestyle that she led. She also has doubts over the ways in which officers responded to the circumstances of her disappearance, feeling that they very rapidly assumed a case of suicide and didn't extend the investigation nor furnish it with resources. In reflecting on her discussions with the police, Raquelle says:

"As soon as they found her stuff they were probably under the assumption that she killed herself, that she was dead and I think that had a huge impact on the search. There was no point in them searching for 'something' that was probably dead already in their opinion" (Raquelle).

For Raquelle, the background work on her sister, and the police response to, and interest in, detail about her character and background was limited:

"Basically just a little bit about her background, what was going on in her life and her struggles and what may have caused her to go missing or maybe commit suicide, but they had made up their minds that's what she had done and it probably lasted about twenty minutes, a chat and that was it" (Raquelle).

While for others, the local investigation means that: *"with the local police and the search teams, not one assumption was made"* (Alice), and: *"they didn't pre-judge him like people sometimes do if you mention a mental health problem"* (Eithne).

For some families, a perceived lack of engagement or seemingly mis-interpretation of the character and known preferences of the missing family member seems to be a problem. This is particularly distressing if detail related to spatial characterisations and preferences are dismissed. In the case of Sasha, who believed her husband left to die by suicide and who would have chosen his place to die carefully, the police presented quite another scenario, that in fact he had left to have an affair (despite no material evidence in this regard). In Sasha's view, they didn't take seriously her geographical commentary on how well she thought she knew how her aging, depressed and infirm husband would have negotiated physical terrain:

"They were much harder [a local police team], much more [and using] critical, stupid, stupid language from the Missing People Team, I mean the woman police officer said to me, because I was talking about the letters that he had written and his concern and she said something like, 'well if he was that concerned he would have left you a note to say where he was'. I thought 'oh my God you can't say things like that' and [they were] [...] derogatory about the relationship in a way because I was saying if you found the car here then I think he will be in this radius because he couldn't

walk that far so the chance of him walking more than, not even three miles. So I was kind of putting the story [out] of how well I know him and where I think this radius may be and that he wouldn't be able to do very steep paths, they would be low paths, but because he was intelligent he would be aware of not being found on a path, but tucking himself away so he can't be found. They were kinda like, 'well you know nothing because he wouldn't have left you'. So there was a bit of 'he's left you rather than he's missing', and to this date they class him as a missing person who's left me rather than a missing person who's disappeared with the intention of suicide" (Sasha).

When the police and the family differ on the assumed motivation for the missing episode, this can have serious consequences for the type of search enquiry and for some families this is devastating, as they may feel their words, character witness and intimate knowledge of their missing relative is not being well regarded and utilised within the investigation, as Sasha goes on to say: *"I didn't feel that what I said was valued"*. **Case study one** and **Case study two** shows in more detail how this tension might affect not only the search, but also the family-police liaison and partnership.

Case study one: Searching for Jim

Some families report having had difficulty impressing upon officers something about the unusual nature of the spatial behaviour and the disappearance and the particularity of the character of the missing person. This can be extremely distressing and has significant impact upon the early stages of investigation. In case study one, two parents, Laura and Charles, talk of their son, Jim, aged twenty-one, who at the point of interview has been missing for two years. Laura and Charles told of the difficulty they felt they had with regards to getting the local police to file an initial report and take account of their portrayal of character witness of *their* son:

> Laura [Mother]: *"They [the police] wouldn't accept he was a missing person. I said 'this is not right, there's something not right here, he's gone'. And they wouldn't accept it; they said call back in a few weeks. So I kept badgering them. What I couldn't get across to them was he didn't phone on the Wednesday, he phoned me every Wednesday, that's my day off, he always phoned me. I think generally the police at that time thought 'he'll turn up, don't worry about it. We've seen this thing happen before, he must have overreacted to the situation'. And there was this thing about a missing person for a certain time. Yeah, they kept saying twelve weeks. And I kept saying 'I can't believe that's right' ".*

> Charles [Father]: *"The thing was it was a bit out of character. It was just so odd".*

In this case, it wasn't until three weeks after the initial disappearance, and repeated calls from Laura to express her concerns that Jim's disappearance was out of character, that the local police filed a missing person report. The risk status assigned to Jim was low, and Laura reports that the police told her: *"he's not got any psychiatric problems, he's not ill, there's nothing wrong with him, he's quite a normal mature lad"*. Although a report was filed and Jim's parents were interviewed three weeks after he disappeared, the main investigation didn't fully begin until Jim had been missing five to six weeks. Laura and Charles carried out their own searches based on what they thought Jim was likely to have done and where he might have gone. However, not all types of search were available to them. Once the police became involved they began interviewing the family, friends, and contacting Interpol, as there was a suggestion that Jim had been researching European destinations on his mobile phone. In light of this information, the family also began to push for certain types of technological searches, such as mobile phone checks and bank account checks. It was not until some considerable time later that mobile phone records were returned to reveal that Jim's phone had been switched on in France, but not used. The parents spoke about a varied relationship with the police, partly because they were often called on Sunday nights or late at night for news updates or obtaining information, they felt that their case was not a priority. Further they were not always made aware of the police searches being carried out or who was on/off the investigation team. When new staff came on board without warning, the parents had to repeat the facts and answer what they thought were odd questions – often via email – which were unclear and repetitive. This led them to believe that their character witness was not being well recorded nor taken seriously enough in the investigation.

In this case, the police called unexpectedly on a Sunday evening, a year after the initial disappearance, to say they had closed the case. The case was closed as they believed Jim to be a: *"perfectly competent adult and he's gone missing of his own accord"*. The family report not being involved in that decision, and also feeling in limbo as a result of this, but they are now trying to live their lives actively, alongside their own continued search.

Case study two: Searching for Paul

Ray and Charlotte discuss their missing eighteen year old son Paul in a site specific case. Paul has been missing for three years, and was living at home with his parents on the day he was last seen. On the day Paul disappeared, Ray was meant to give him a lift to college, instead, and unexpectedly, Paul ended up driving himself because his parents were a bit late. Paul didn't return home that evening and Ray and Charlotte called the police. The next morning the police informed them that the car had been found near cliffs popular with bird watchers, but there was no trace of Paul. As a result, the local police were persistent with a dominant suicide narrative to explain the disappearance. Ray is insistent that the police narrative about suicidal young males does not fit with the Paul they knew at that time: *"it did not relate to his circumstances that existed on the day that he disappeared"*. The family are in disagreement with police because as Ray says: *"it was a mindset that his car was found by the cliffs. And they never got over that. It was a hurdle we could never climb over"*. The family, in contrast, were insistent that he was interested in a bunker adjacent to the cliffs and had likely gone to explore that, as this site was registered on Paul's web browser on the morning of his disappearance. This bunker was searched, but had not been subjected to a dead body search two years after the event at time of interview. The disjuncture between the police and the family narrative of the case resulted in both parties making extensive search enquiries, but the family search extending to individuals and experts beyond the known police search in order to find explanation and prompt further action:

Police Search Activity

- Searched car park and cliff area;
- Petrol tank analysis;
- Reconstructed route (wrongly);
- Computer analysis;
- Voice analysis;
- Interviewing parents and students and swimming pool staff;
- Live (not dead) body search of the bunker;
- Media appeals;
- Finger printed car.

Family Search Activity

- Searched car park and cliff area;
- Petrol tank analysis and VOSA confirmations;
- RAF maps and bunkersite plans;
- Reconstructed route and filmed road test;
- Posters;
- Computer search;
- Interviewing students and local people and farmers and search and rescue operatives;
- Media;
- Local MP and letter writing to police.

Case analysis: Suicide

Case analysis: Body in underground bunker

The family have gone to considerable lengths to establish where Paul might have driven the day he disappeared, including looking at how much petrol was in the car by contacting VOSA to verify the size of the petrol tank. They also downloaded maps and technical reports of the RAF bunker where they believe Paul might have entered, and they spoke to ex-RAF personnel about the bunker and its layout. They also met with local fire and rescue service representatives to request information on the search of bunker and for it to be re-searched. They visited the location many times, and interviewed local shop workers, also speaking to the farmer who owned the bunker. The parents arranged for posters to be put up along walking routes near the cliffs, and also replicated the likely journey driven by Paul to the site, filming a road test of the car to verify its petrol consumption. Ray conducted web searches

on police 'best practice guides' to missing person investigations, and looked at ACPO guidelines, also researching technical reports on currents and tides. The family enlisted the help of their local MP and involved the media in the search. As such, Paul's family have attempted to both verify and extend the police search and at significant financial, temporal and emotional cost, as Ray explains:

> *"I occupy myself with trying to think of something to do all the time that is going to lead to a break through. I go over the facts of the case repeatedly, this is why I have such detail in my mind, it's all live to me. I think and think and think about the things that I think I've done and I think I know [...] perhaps something else will occur to me that I haven't done that I will be able to do. I constantly strive to find an answer".*

This is an example of family perspectives on search activity and what happens when communications and relations break down, and also when family character witness is not well regarded from the family's perspective. A rapid response to the call for a dead body search in this case study, and different attempts at family liaison, might have helped the family psychologically, but also help to resolve unanswered questions about the police investigation, which are being continually raised within the local community via the family.

In the case studies and section above, we see little evidence of police working in full partnership with families. While some families have positive experiences, they may also be understood as passive players in investigations, and for others there are significant problems with getting police officers to take seriously their character witness of their missing relatives and securing their role in search scenarios. While police officers have a clear duty of care to locate the absent (and see below), they also have a duty of care to families to make sure they feel, as far as possible, fully involved in the search process and that their case-related information is seen as valid by officers.

Young men and gender issues

Seventeen of our twenty-five interviewees were searching for missing men. We choose to briefly highlight this here, as the character witness issues outlined here in section three and the two case studies show how reporting missing people can be refracted through issues of gender. It seems that for some there is a particular difficulty in reporting male or young male absence, as strong assumptions about the mobile nature of (young) men and their spatial behaviour can form barriers to effective reporting:

> *"He [the police officer] was like 'you're wasting our time, this is a man that's gone off rather than a man that is missing' and he was quite critical of missing people in a way. He said the majority of missing people are found and I had to understand that"* (Sasha).

> *"The police officers actually said, 'he's an adult', 'he's a male' and 'as an adult male it's his civil liberty to go missing' "* (Tina).

Family members are strong in their recommendations of what this means and for officers' response:

> *"Not to assume that he has chosen to go off of his own accord and to listen to what the family is saying, and to learn to trust the family that perhaps the family knows better than they do that this particular young man and [that] he's not a habitual missing person [...]. So, they need to be a little bit more sympathetic particularly to young males"* (Misha).

Other family respondents agree with this view, and argue that policing governance should respond to what seems like problematic attitudes towards masculine mobility, in which young men are not recognised as at being so at risk as women in some missing investigations:

> *"The greatest number of fatalities in missing is the young men, it's not the young children, and when you look at the police time and the commitment and the resource given, it doesn't follow the risk profile because the risk profile [means] they would be concentrating on the young men"* (Tina).

One way in which some family members have managed service-specific attitudes towards young men's missing mobility is to keep in touch constantly with those who have professional connections to their missing men, or to men who repeatedly go missing. This tactic is precisely in order so that 'the system' cannot neglect them:

> *"I'm also keeping my iron in the fire so that they know I care, that my son has someone that cares about him and is going to fight for his survival and will not let him get lost. That the system has to work and do its job and everyone do their best for him, that he's not going to be written off like a lot of other people do"* (Pauline).

Such a strategy can be understood as a strategic attempt to remind 'systems' of search and care that missing people are individual human beings with lives to be lived.

SECTION 4

Communication standards between families and police

"Communication is massive, that's the biggest. Communication, not just to be left and we shouldn't have been the ones that were chasing what was going on. We have got grief to deal with and confusion and anger, we shouldn't have to be doing this, that should have been their job" (Raquelle).

In section two, we highlighted the need for single-points of police contact and regular information to be extended to families, and in section three we have highlighted the ways in which detailed family information and character witness is incorporated into missing persons enquiries. In this section, we wish to concentrate on what families said about the quality and nature of communications between themselves and the police.

Interviewees commented on the specific detail of the police-led communication, which was directly related to family perceptions of its standard:

"There was a fourth officer who was the Search and Rescue Officer, he played a minor role but he was much more informative. He talked about how difficult it is to find a body after a certain length of time, how the first twenty-four hours are crucial, the fact that fourteen days have gone past made the search much more difficult and would need a specialist dog by then and he talked, but not in a frightening way, he talked about other environmental factors

that you would look at. So he was feeding in factual information in a way, and I know it sounds gruesome but in a way that actually was tolerable to listen to and I was able to acknowledge" (Sasha).

For many families their basic understanding of police search was not only related to the level and frequency of information flow in family-police relationships, but also its detail and clarity. For many, this information did not convey adequate detail:

"I'm not terribly sure everything that the police did. Because when I phoned them every day, it was just as case of 'we've not heard anything, we've got nothing to tell you.' And I suppose maybe I should have asked the specific questions, 'what areas are you looking? What are you doing? Who are you speaking to?' " (Aileen).

Where lack of communication or lack of detailed communication occurs, this can lead to perceptions of poor standards, including the belief that the police are not trained in dealing with missing persons enquiries:

"What I find so difficult is understanding the process of their searching because it doesn't seem to be a set out, 'here's our hypothesis, here's our methodology, here's the rationale for why we are just going to do this and this is what we're hoping'. They didn't ever provide anything [...] So, kind of, as a partner of a missing person you want something tangible in your hands that you can look at and say they did this [...]" (Sasha).

"The police aren't trained to handle a missing or a disappearance, you can't really blame them for the way that it works because there probably isn't a guide for them to follow. 'Right that's the protocol, this is where we've got to go with it next' " (Raquelle).

Families understandably take a great deal of interest in the detail of the investigative search for their missing members, it is in the interests of family-police relationships that information is shared, as far as possible, about search parameters and methodology, so that the family can be assured that highly professional and expert work is taking place to locate their missing person.

Police response to complaints and empathetic social relations

Individual officers and what they say to family members in their questioning, answering the phone and providing follow-up information is critical to family perceptions of a good policing service. Some forces respond well to critique and feedback about who is doing good family liaison work and who is not. Alice, below, had the confidence to complain about an unhelpful officer, who did not connect well with the family, although not all people would be able to act as she did:

"I felt that there was something that she wasn't telling us. She wasn't quite as connected with the family

as such. I got really angry about that to the point where we ended up feeding it back to the police, saying we're really not happy with her, to the point where they came down and had a meeting with us. She didn't come back on the case after that" (Alice).

When relationships do breakdown, swift police liaison work is critical to containing the situation and keeping a good working relationship with the family, as Alice reports of the reaction of a local officer to her complaint above:

"[He said] 'we can't do our job without the goodwill of the family, so if this isn't working we're going to have to find something else that does work'. So they were very good in that way. The likes of 'if we're not supporting you, you're not supporting us, so we're not going to get what we need out of this' " (Alice).

The work that police officers do in reassuring and relating to families is critically bound up with the ways in which they speak to them and the language that they use in explaining their actions:

"I will always be so grateful to them (the local police) for using that phrase - 'it's our duty to find him for you'. And they rang me afterwards and they were excellent" (Eithne).

"The tone of voice is very important. It's important to give people some hope. And the hope will come from facts like 'this is the network we've got in place'. It's no good saying 'his name is on the book'. People need to know how he is being actively searched for, 'this is how it's being carried out' " (Pauline).

Where missing incidents took place in communities with good police-community relations, the effect on missing persons enquiries was notable, and evidenced in the ways in which officers spoke about their involvement:

"The Inspector, he very much took it to heart. If there was anything he could do, he was pulling in absolutely everything. I think there was a bit of ownership there as well, 'this is one of ours'. So they were absolutely determined. And certainly the CID sergeant, his thoughts were 'that could have been my mum' and I think that's what they were holding, that could be them and what would they want done?" (Alice).

Attention to language, conduct and communication is therefore key to good police work with families.

Identifying good police practice and improvement

The role of the Family Liasion Officer (FLO) was noted as being particularly helpful in producing good family-police relationships. This in part was due to easy-access to an officer to whom a range of questions could be directed without fear of disrupting the search or drawing on staff resource that might be better deployed elsewhere:

"When we had the liaison officer that was brilliant because I felt I could ask, and I didn't feel like I was being

silly asking, saying 'can you access GPs records throughout the whole of the UK and see if he's registered? Can you access dentists?' I kept saying 'can you tell me if he's gone for Jobseeker's Allowance?' And he said 'yes, I can do all that' " (Charles and Laura).

"I think anybody that has somebody that disappears or goes missing needs a family liaison officer that can help them ask those questions and point them in the right direction because I never had that, that would have been nice" (Raquelle).

In the best examples, good family liaison work does not have to be confined to the FLO role, although this does help. Some interviewees pointed to relationships with local forces that last for years:

"They came, the last time was two years ago [after eighteen years] and they knocked at the door, and they said 'we're just coming round because it's the anniversary of your [husbands] disappearance, and we were just wondering if you'd heard any news or anything?' They said 'it's not closed, it's still on the police computer' " (Gladys).

For those families who feel that they have experienced poor practice in the handling of their missing report, then they are clear about what would have made a difference: clear demonstrations of empathetic sensitivity; clear information; and clear response to family concerns, especially when there is conflict over the scenario for the disappearance:

"I think when there is bereavement or a murder there is a lot of family support, and it just would have been nice if we had been treated that way as well like human beings; 'is there anything else that they could have done?', 'is there anything else that we can think of as a family that would help?'. 'Were we happy with the presumption of maybe suicide?' because the answer probably would have been no" (Raquelle).

Partnership working

In a small minority of cases, families report on the ways in which they worked in partnership with the local police, for example, by undertaking letter writing tasks which were allocated to them by the police:

"We were in regular contact, but they [the police] said 'well you deal with the writing to the Health boards and you deal with writing to the local churches'. We worked very, very closely with them. We had very good liaison officer, and I don't know whether they sort of divvied it up or whether they thought, 'there is no point in us looking at that, we're going to look at this and if you want to do something guys, you know, if you've got some ideas you crack on and you can get on with those ideas' " (Patrick).

"I got some small maps and identified for them particular places that we would have gone that were of interest, so I was kind of supplying this to them'" (Sasha).

Although families understand that they cannot obstruct or disrupt police investigation, many are sure that they could have more productive working partnerships, and whereby information flow, content and task allocation could reflect and produce better police-family liaison.

SECTION 5
Communication with other agencies

Searching for a missing member can be a time of great confusion, and for many families they have no clear idea what the process involves, and indeed who is responsible for different aspects of the search. Families spoke about a need for clear information in the early hours of an investigation that clarifies the role of the police and what other partnership agencies they might work with for the purpose of search. This was so that families can plan a complementary search strategy with reduced chance of duplication, as Charles sums up:

> *"I think having something that gave you an outline of what they can and can't do. Because we don't really understand what the police role is in missing persons, police are for arresting people and whatever. It's a bit like knowing what do Missing Persons [charity] do, how do they overlap with people like Salvation Army? But having something that gave you an outline and an idea of where their parameters of responsibility start and stop. Because in some ways that gives you a handle that if they're not going to do it then that's something you could do yourself. So you don't know how proactive you need to be because you don't know what they're going to do"* (Charles).

Here, Charles highlights the lack of knowledge that families have not only of police roles, but also of the role of other agencies in the search process. Not

knowing what the police do in missing persons searches can lead family members to feel disempowered to act. Clarifying roles and responsibilities would help to create more effective partnership working within police services but also assist families in knowing where and through who they may seek different and particular kinds of help to search via other services. Families can struggle to understand what services are available, and how best to access them in general terms.

Mental health services and responding to missing people

Research suggests that many people who get reported as missing suffer poor health or have a disability (Biehal et al., 2003), and that this may be as high as eighty percent (Gibb and Woolnough, 2007; Stevenson et al., 2013). Unsurprisingly, and as a result, families of missing adults often find themselves in communications with mental health services during their searches, as Aileen describes:

> *"I just said to them 'my brother's missing'. I don't know if the police had told them at that stage or not. I didn't ask them. But no, the CPN just said 'I've not seen your brother in weeks, he wasn't engaging with me, I've closed his case, in fact'. So I got the impression of 'don't involve me, your brother is nothing to do with me now and I've not seen him in ages, so there you go'. And the support worker, she was pretty much the same, 'I've not seen him in a while' "* (Aileen).

Adults who are not detained in hospital via a legal mental health 'section' have the right to go missing in the UK, and as a result agencies such as mental health care services are perceived as sometimes not acting quickly or effectively enough in a missing person case. In addition, and during times of crisis, data protection laws can seem unnecessarily obstructive, and interviewees describe the barriers they face when attempting to work in partnership with agencies:

> *"They've wrote a pathetic letter of apology and said something about the confidentiality thing, they aren't allowed to give information over the phone, even though you're somebody's mother and you're distraught and your child is missing, you still can't get any information on the phone"* (Eithne).

Mental health services are governed by strict laws of patient confidentiality and non-disclosure, but they hold vital information, such as when was the last time a missing person might have been seen, the mood of the person, and whether they were taking medication, all of which could help to build and secure character witness and influence search strategy. Learning to work together to communicate more effectively and empathetically with families in crisis is an important requirement of care services, and more needs to be done to create 'reasonable disclosures' in missing situations. Mental health services may also have a key role in learning to recognise impending signs of missingness and responding to these proactively could help prevent future episodes (Stevenson et al., 2013).

SECTION 6
Liaising with the UK Missing People charity

The charity Missing People (formally known as National Missing Persons Helpline) was set up over twenty years ago to offer a lifeline when someone is away to provide practical support, as Patrick, a family member, mentions: *"Missing People is basically filling that information void and providing the links through where it didn't use to happen"* (Patrick). Since 2005, police forces have been encouraged to refer family members who require support to the UK charity Missing People, and a national protocol has been implemented to facilitate this process (ACPO, 2005). Today, the need for such support agencies to complement the police response is widely acknowledged in various reviews and guidance documents (Compass Partnership, 2000; Nove, 2005; ACPO, 2005; ACPO, 2010) and Missing People are firmly established as the UK's leading charity, providing numerous services to the families of missing people.

Family perceptions of the Missing People charity

In this project, the majority of family respondents were parents of missing adults, closely followed by siblings. Not all the families in this study knew of, or were involved with, the charity Missing People, and for those that were, their engagement varied. For some families there was an initial hesitation to connect with the charity, and this was because they were unsure if their missing person or indeed they qualified for support, as

Aileen explains in relation to her brother's disappearance:

> *"When I'd looked on the Missing People website I thought 'would this be something that they could help me with?' because I came to think my brother has done it of his own free will and done it of his own volition, does that mean he wouldn't be a high priority or meet all the criteria or what-not?. And when I looked at their website I thought 'yeah, he does appear to meet that criteria'. And I looked at what they could do, offer support to family and liaison with the police, and they could put out posters and contact agencies and whatever. So I took the plunge and I phoned them up and they were just brilliant from the outset. They confirmed they could help and they just explained things that I'd read on the website"* (Aileen).

As Aileen reflects, Missing People offers a range of service provision to support families when an adult has been reported as missing. Services and support range from: a twenty-four hour free-phone helpline; assistance in the search via publicity posters; web appeals and work with the media via a network of media partners who make appeals on the charities behalf, as well as police-family-charity liaison work. More recently the charity has begun to provide focused support through telephone counselling, family support days and an online forum. During missing events families can feel extremely isolated, and talking with those who have no experience or specific training in missing issues can exacerbate these feelings. The value of being able to talk at any time of the night or day with trained staff through the charity helpline was seen as a supportive resource: *"I did get in touch with the Missing People charity and they were really, really good. They were really helpful, just even for someone to talk to"* (Aileen). Families contacted the charity at various points in their missing experience, as did different members of the same family, as Judy explains:

> *"I didn't really get involved until I was at my wit's end one day, six weeks after he'd gone missing and I didn't know what to do so I was just going over the edge, really. And I phoned them and said I just needed to talk, they said 'that's fine, just talk'. They got who I was through my son's name, I said 'my daughter is your main point of contact', but they chatted with me and then they phoned me again the next day to see if I was alright. They've been very good"* (Judy).

As expressed by Judy and others, during times of crises the opportunity for talking and providing a space of recognition for their missing family member is vital to helping families cope with their ambiguous loss. Missing People do also provide search assistance. Family members spoke of the ways in which the charity acts in partnership with the police to develop and carry out a search strategy with families that both complements and extends police search as summarised by Aileen's experience:

> *"Once I got involved with the Missing People charity and they were good, they act as a liaison with the police as well, and they told me what they*

were doing in agreement with the police. So it was more when they got involved, and they got my brother's photo and they distributed it in the local area and Edinburgh. I think they contacted homeless persons services in Edinburgh and things like that" (Aileen).

Once the police have agreed to charity involvement, and the family are happy for publicity to go ahead, Missing People work with family members to decide where to target publicity. Through this type of discussion families felt more involved and valued as key partners in the search, as Aileen comments:

" 'We're doing a poster campaign, where do you think we should do it? What towns and villages?' So they were really good, they were good at talking to me. I felt that they maybe had a better kind of communication with the police. So I felt that's good, if I don't hear from the police or get information from the police, maybe I could speak to them as an independent, instead of me constantly going to the police and being told 'nothing yet' " (Aileen).

Not only did Missing People facilitate a sense of partnership working in which families recognised themselves as active search agents, they reinforced the benefit of good communications, which was seen as an integral part of creating a positive experience for families during a time of crisis. For some, the charity became a key information broker between the police and themselves. Interviewees spoke of the positive benefits the charity provided as an independent body available to both listen to and relay information from the police side of the investigation. Families welcomed the constant flow of communication, as there is a need to be kept informed, even when there is "no new information", as regular communication was understood as valuable in helping with the management of emotions around ambiguous loss.

Companionship

Families can feel isolated and 'frozen' in their reactions to missing loss (see Boss, 1999). Moving between states of hopefulness and hopelessness (Wayland, 2007), and these feelings can oscillate throughout the missing situation (Holmes, 2008). The longevity of some missing situations can mean that initial support from wider family members or friends wanes over time. Missing People can provide an on-going sense of support:

"If I go through stressful periods, they let you know they're always there and they never stop. They'll never close the case down. They'll always be there. Since September I spoke to them on the phone and they've come back and said 'we're going to do two low key looks for my son'. Just the feeling that you are, you're not standing there on your own. There is somebody there that is trying to help you and they understand or they try and understand what you're going through" (Misha).

Possibly one of the biggest challenges that families of missing people face is the lack of resolution: 'the pain of

not knowing and the mental torture of perhaps never knowing' (Hunter Institute of Mental Health, 2001: 35). Unlike grief models with an underlying assumption that 'time heals all', there is a recognition that the need for support for families of missing people does not diminish over time (Holmes, 2008), although families may also be supported to gain resilience themselves. Supporting families to be active in their emotional response to and management of missing situations, as well as receive an empathetic response by the charity was seen as significant by families.

Getting involved with the charity

Missing People tailor service provision to meet the needs of its users in the eyes of the families who spoke with us. Encouraging families to become active in their loss is something reflected on by Raquelle, when discussing her own involvement in service development:

> *"The one thing was 'Living Better in Limbo', [...] there was quite a few of us on board with that and that was quite good. It was over the phone and having many discussions, so that was great to set that up. And the other one was the leaflet which was the 'help leaflet' which I helped set up as well, and then we did the family support, that was really good, it was nice to meet other people"* (Raquelle).

'Involvement' in the charity can range from fundraising to media engagement and policy development to service evaluation. There are a core group of 'family representatives' that regularly make media appearances, assist with fundraising activity and help ensure the services meet the needs of its users by directly referencing their own experiences. Other families contributed to service development on a more ad-hoc basis. For Raquelle and other families, being consulted by the charity and feeling as though they are making a difference in the lives of themselves and others was important to their recovery, and assisted a sense of empowerment, as well as ensuring that the services offered were appropriate to meet the needs of families. Some families less active or new to missing situations also contributed to service development after the charity prompted their feedback, and Judy describes when reflecting her first experience of being involved in the annual carol service:

> *"I found it extremely harrowing [...] they did email us all the next day saying 'hope you got something out of it, lovely to meet you'. Anyway, I thought this is my opportunity to write to her and say 'yes it was good to meet everyone, it was lovely to meet everyone from Missing.org and to meet the other families. But I came away more pessimistic than when I went. I felt that there's no hope left for us'. And I suggested that after that part of the service where people stand up and talk about their missing person, perhaps we could have a section saying 'these are the people that have been found this year alive and well, or recovering' or whatever. They could mention a few people who have been found. That would give you hope. You would come away*

with some hope. She emailed me back and said, 'that's a very good idea, lots of people on the board here have read that and we felt that the tone was wrong' and they did take it on board. Hopefully they'll be able to do something like that, to give hope next time'" (Judy).

Meetings that discuss missing people, family rituals marking birthdays, anniversaries or Christmas can present huge dilemmas in terms of how best to manage these in light of painful absence (Holmes, 2008). For the last two years the charity has organised a December carol service, aimed at both promoting connectedness between families and providing a space of collective remembrance for those missing. Whilst remembrance and connectedness is important, Judy calls for the content of support services to be also orientated toward providing spaces for hope, as hope is a vital emotion, and 'profoundly important in stories of missingness' (Clark et al., 2009).

Networking with other families

Nearly all interviewees involved spoke of the importance of networking with other families of missing people and the charity offer a range of ways to do this. Yet, as Alice describes below, missing situations are experienced as unique both within and across families, and this makes processes of interaction, talk and understanding complicated:

"A lot of them had missing children, and I found it very difficult and I think them as well, because there was only me and one other person who had an older person that was missing, and they couldn't understand there was a difference there" (Alice).

Some reflected on the difficulty of communicating with other families of missing people in regards to the online Family Connect Forum, a forum designed to facilitate families to share, to get support and to get to know each other in a virtual community. Although the forum *is* moderated for safe and supportive use by the Moderation Team at Missing People, families spoke about sometimes requiring more specialist support, such as a psychologist:

"I think if it had been supported by a support specialist or a psychologist, that could have been more balanced" (Alice).

For some of the reasons already mentioned above, and further elaborated by Alice, some family members particularly valued facilitated face-to-face interactions:

"When I went to the family day the other month there, I found that really helpful. And we were all very different. Every single one of us had a different sort of story, but because it was facilitated the way it was, it was helpful. It was well facilitated by them and we had the psychologist in as well, we really felt supported and we all had that space for telling our own story, and tears were good, emotions were good and all of that. I felt that was a lot more beneficial than the online forum" (Alice).

Face-to-face interactions through family support days provided a space

to tell missing stories in a supported environment. The days were emotionally taxing on families, but were thought to be more beneficial than the online forum in our sample. The added 'safety net' of having a psychologist present meant that families could be supported in their emotional management by a clinician whilst still being empathetic to the stories of others. Once families were comfortable with one another they did form their own informal support groups as a result of this contact, as Judy comments: *"I did meet up with a couple of ladies, who I'm now still in contact with which is lovely".*

Learning to cope with ambiguous loss is complex and the stress and trauma of having someone missing can individualise family member's experiences of grief and this is recognised by the charity. Missing People actively encourage contact between a range of family members. Yet, whilst some family members welcomed the chance to connect with others, this wasn't the case for everyone:

> *"I thought 'no, I can't do it, can't go sing carols'. Anyway, when they said you can come beforehand and meet other people, talk to them and meet up, anyway, my husband said 'come on, we should go'. And I never expected him to say that. He said 'no, we can talk to people and find out what they're doing and it'd be nice to get a network with other families'. […] My daughter wanted to come, so the three of us went"* (Judy).

Loss can at times go 'unacknowledged, socially negated, invalidated or unrecognized' (Dempsey and Baago, 1998:86; and see Doka, 1989), and as a result families of those reported as missing may feel stigmatised and isolated (Missing People, 2012). Some family members feel particularly alone, as they have limited identification with the charity because of the length of time of the missing episode:

> *"When I think of a missing person or a missing persons charity, I really think of that, it's great that it's available and thank you very much, but I think it's for people who their family member has gone missing for weeks, months, still missing"* (Lynsey).

Some family members, then, carry the burden of understanding 'authentic' missing experience as a long term event only, which sadly prevents them from connecting with the charity and others in similar situations. This suggests more promotional work could be done to focus on types of missing experience that provide effective encouragement for all families to contact the charity, regardless of their missing situation.

SECTION 7
Family search strategies and practice over time

"It doesn't matter whether its five years, ten years, twenty years. It never stops. It never stops in your mind. You're always searching. So searching is emotionally exhausting as well as physically exhausting and mentally exhausting because you are having to think of new ways to search all the time, as time goes by. There are sort of peaks and troughs as the years have gone by. Twenty years is a long time" (Misha).

In light of the varied experiences that interviewees relate above; diverse quality of contact with the police, varied standards in communications with a range of agencies, and the support of an active charity, the families that took part in this research report being forced or inspired to take searching into their own hands. This section explores what families have to say about such practices and Table two (pg 53) shows the range of search activity that the interviewees discussed. The table differentiates different types of activity – physical, documentary and virtual, social networking, liaison with other agencies/professionals and other practices – and shows the enormous lengths that families go to in trying to locate their loved one, or locate information about them. Below, Sally explains why the sheer trauma of a loved one's absence can galvanise people into initial search action:

"It's like a massive shock, but then you kind of feel like, well for me, I kind of felt like I had to take action.

Like again, if someone dies you can't do anything about it. You can't go, well I'll go and look for them. They died, it's a final thing, whereas you kind of feel like you have to do something, but you don't necessarily know what it is you're doing because it's not been done before, most of the time" (Sally).

Sally describes the confusion that families can feel in starting their own search, in terms of not being sure of what to do, but responding to the need to do something. Advertising the absence via posters, phone-calls and door knocking and route-tracing are some of the very first search practices that families engage in. As Sally reveals, sometimes this search facilitates information that the police are not even yet aware of:

"So when I got one of my friends to hand out some of the posters I sent her into the Post Office and they actually showed her the CCTV of the morning of my dad going in and buying his paper and Kit Kat as per usual like he was going to work, which the police hadn't known about because the police hadn't been to the Post Office, so they hadn't seen the CCTV" (Sally).

This initial physical search is characterised by an intensity that belies the weight of the loss for families and the unbearable nature of the absence. Raquelle describes how she intensively searched the beach where her sister was last seen, alongside more widespread search strategies:

"Looking, looking. Going up to that beach every day, every day, my dad drawing up posters and going to [the city centre] and handing them out to the homeless people and chatting to them. […] And making phone calls to friends, posting messages on Facebook, getting in contact with Missing People which then got in contact with the police. […] A lot of walking, beach combing, looking not just for my sister but for belongings, her house keys. I had my husband climbing up rocks and looking in little crevices, just to see, and the woodlands that were around there. I don't think I'll ever stop" (Raquelle).

Several interviewees report on the search for personal belongings and effects, as they combine activity to seek a person and their physical traces. Such search strategies are occasionally carried out in partnership with the police, but sometimes families have had to organise this themselves, especially in light of poor police relationships or conflict over the cause of the disappearance:

"I asked them if they would do a poster campaign about while you were at work or out walking look for these missing items of clothing, they wouldn't do that, they said that's too scary for the general public, so I did it, I put up about two hundred and fifty posters on the hill saying we are looking for a haversack, we are looking for a black coat, black walking boats and they might help the Police with their investigation" (Sasha).

Table two: Range of search activities reported by families of missing people

Family Search Activity	
PHYSICAL	
Searching personal belongings and accommodation	Visits to homeless shelters and rough sleeping spaces
Site-specific search on foot and in car	Design maps and search teams
Door knocking	Visiting cafes, pubs and supermarkets
Replicating/re-enacting journeys	Computer search Interviewing local specialists/ significant actors (e.g. shop-workers, landowners, drug dealers, Search and Rescue services, retired police officers)
Computer search	
DOCUMENTARY / VIRTUAL	
Ringing mobile phone	Social media appeals and pages
Posters individually designed and with charity Missing People	Letters to all UK Health boards
Media appeals (TV news and documentaries, Radio, Print)	Letters to UK monasteries
Letters to all churches in specific locales	Contacting airlines
Phone calls to community psychiatric services and hospitals	Phone calls notifying all-night supermarkets in specific locales
Phone calls to banking services	Letters to French Foreign Legion
Contacting specialist services for specialist maps (e.g. RAF)	Contacting specialist services (e.g. VOSA, Search and Rescue services)
Obtaining technical reports on tides and currents	Research on private search and rescue and detection
Contacting Embassies and the British High Commission	Research on private dive teams
Contacting celebrities for assistance with media profiling	Formal requests for further search to police teams
Downloading NPIA guidance on missing persons	Research on missing people profiling techniques
Contacting local MP	
SOCIAL NETWORKS / ALERTS	
Visits and calls to all family and friends and address book contacts	
OTHER / CHARITABLE HELP	
Missing People charity	Paying for character statements from psychiatrists, significant professional others
Salvation Army; Foreign Legion; homeless shelters	
OTHER PRACTICES	
'Looking' but not searching	

The search practices that families engage in both draw upon their latent knowledge of their own personal geographies and that of their missing member. In practical terms this can mean remembering and retracing usual routes and routines, but also more in-depth appraisals of 'where mattered' to the missing person and why. This difficult task might take in childhood haunts, sites of romantic significance, death places and graves, well-appreciated landscapes and favourite views, or general areas and regions and preferred pathways. For Pauline, whose son has been reported as missing many times, she relates how she manages the physical search, bound up with a detailed knowledge of her son and the local area:

> *"I go out in the car to where I think his normal haunts would be, little paths he would take from the hospital ward to the shop. And I know that if he goes along to the bank, where he's not supposed to be, in the next little mini-town, he would be walking. I know he'd be on foot. I have gone out straight away, as soon as I know he's missing, if I've been told from the hospital in the daytime, I'll go out in the daytime. But because the streets are busy and the traffic is bad you can't really be looking. So what I do is I wait to late, it might be midnight, usually about ten, eleven, twelve, the streets around our area tend clear and there's decent street lights, it's not a rural area, there's lots of light. So I go, first of all from our house to the hospital, I drive round and round the hospital grounds and all the streets [...], because of a pattern that he's followed in past experience"* (Pauline).

The family search is a practice shared by many of the interviewees (with important exceptions, see below). These are practices that can be intensively repeated during early stages of an investigation, but also diminish over time, as other types of search activity take over, and as search becomes part of a routine in the newly established life that follows missing absence. Many family members report that is it difficult not to engage in some search activity every week or every month, even in long term cases:

> *"So that kind [physical search] stops, but then the internet takes over, so I think probably for the first year, there's more of the walking around, trying to find him. Now I would probably say every week, you know, once a week I'm on the internet trying to find something over the internet because you've got to be seen to be doing something, you can't not do it"* (Gladys).

Some people are not searching for a living missing person, but rather for a dead body. This is reflected in search practices which may change, but are still bound by physical location. As Sasha explains, her own search for the dead body of her missing husband changed as she did research on likely locations for end-of-life journeys:

> *"On not finding a body [...] that's kinda what started me on the trail of doing the research to find out well how far do people walk, what's the [usual] radius from their car, is there a link between your intention that you've just had a row with your girlfriend and you don't think life is worth living and being a mature*

man that's making an end of life, quality of life decision? And that's how I kinda came to know more" (Sasha).

Such intensity and effort can be extremely difficult to sustain and deal with, and although search may not stop, or become changed, the impact of this is "emotionally exhausting" as Misha says at the start of this section, and Raquelle elaborates:

"I can play private detective until it sends me mad, you know, so I can't. You also have to slow yourself down a little bit because you still have to go to work and you still have to be mum and you still have to function and you do have to tell yourself 'just stop, just slow it down a bit' because otherwise you would be out there until it would make you ill I think" (Raquelle).

Many families report the difficult emotional consequences of 'living in limbo' (Holmes, 2008), and these are further explored below. In the context of search, emotional upheaval can be significant when there are sightings, which is a real consequence of having regular and updated publicity. For a minority of families in our limited sample, one way of managing the intensity and all-consuming nature of searching activity is not to do it at all, or to stop doing it after a period of time. There are several reasons for this decision, as Alice and Lynsey explain:

" 'What if something has happened to her? What if you find her?' You know, if someone had done something to her, you could actually have made a right mess of a crime scene or something like that. So there was also a bit of that amongst it as well. And to be fair, you don't want her grandchildren to find her in that sort of situation as well, and she wouldn't have wanted that either. So we felt it was much more appropriate for the police to take the whole reign on that sort of thing and we just said to the nieces and nephews 'no, just leave it to them. They know what they're doing and let them get on with it' " (Alice).

"We had fifteen years of estrangement on my brother's part, I'd always kept the door open to him, and I kept one way contact with him through cards and letters and stuff like that, but in fifteen years he never responded to me. So I guess you kind of reach a stage of thinking 'if that is his choice, if he doesn't want to have me in his life, he didn't have me in his life for fifteen years of his own volition, so if he's making that decision now, just want to be left alone'. So I didn't. I didn't carry out any searches, I just had support from the Missing People charity and I was in touch with the police" (Aileen).

Families may need support to know when and how to stop searching and the charity may have a role in this.

Looking not searching

"You are constantly looking even though you aren't searching. Even today, four and a half years later, I still, when I'm driving over that

bridge at the river, I still look down […]. So even though it's not a conscious search, even today we are still looking" (Alice).

For some families active searching is replaced by other practices that are difficult to describe, but relate to an everyday alertness, and a latent awareness that the missing person might be present or traceable in routine, random or significant environments, as Alice describes above. Judy relates something similiar when discussing how friends and family would think that they had recognised the absent person during routine trips:

"Even friends now say that they have diverted their journey to go back to a road that they thought they saw Andrew on, but it wasn't him when they got there or he'd gone. […] People tell us that they are doing it all the time, friends, families, you know, my neighbours and when they are out they are still looking in areas and things" (Judy).

Sasha also begins to suggest that even 'just looking' transforms into something else again, into a practice of remembering, while being in places that were significant to the missing person and the family:

"So it's much more […] rather than 'a look' […] it's a remembrance of we used to like coming here" (Sasha).

So, searching may be a transformative and transforming process, moving from an intense physical search to more documentary and virtual forms, and to practices of looking and remembering.

SECTION 8
Geographical imaginations

> *"It used to be one of the mind games I played when I couldn't sleep: 'where might he be?' and 'which corner of the world might he be?', but there were absolutely no rooted clues for that type of thinking, and even retrospectively I don't think I could have known"* (Laura).

Asking 'where are they?' is a painful question for many families, and yet one that they ask many, many times. For some, this is related to the initial search activity and police questioning, and trying to generate a map of possibly significant locations in which there might be a trace or a person. Laura discusses this process as a difficult one, as she tried really hard to relate to her eighteen year old son and tried to envision 'where?' from his perspective:

> *"My son was eighteen coming up nineteen, but he's still a child in your sort of emotional psychology, you automatically think 'where would he go?', 'what would he be likely to want to do?', 'what would he be feeling?'. And it's not even a conscious thing, you automatically try to follow the more obvious paths of the investigation and like you draw a blank with every obvious channel of possibility, then you have to start thinking all the harder, you know, the hard imaginations of 'what might have happened where?' "* (Laura).

This exercising of a geographical imagination extends for some interviewees

to produce different ways in which to think about the question 'where?':

> *"I imagined he was dead lying in a gutter somewhere. All I could see was a body, really [...] you kept willing for him to walk through that door at the airport, but he just didn't"* (Eithne).

> *"I started thinking 'well, what if she's not found?' It is a terrible thought, but there was a body found that weekend, in the river. So you think 'maybe that's her.' Just horror stories go through your head and you think the vulnerability, being abducted, then maybe jumping off a bridge. Those were my big things"* (Fay).

This traumatic process of imagining possibilities and scenarios is often related to negative projections of death scenes and risk, and where the missing person is visualised as highly vulnerable. This can impact on the feelings of security held by the remaining family. The likely location of the disappearance may transform from an innocuous landscape to one in which those left behind feel threatened or anxious because of the unknown aspects of the disappearance:

> *"I was quite glad when they did find CCTV footage of her in the city, because it got to the point that I didn't like living here anymore because it just didn't feel safe anymore and the thought that she may be lying somewhere round about here. It sort of messes with your head"* (Alice).

For others, the location of the last-known sighting or site specific disappearance becomes the focus for geographical imagination. Sasha, below, discusses the difficult imaginings that were bound up with her own idealised vision of where her husband is likely to have ended his life. She related how her romancized ideal is now tempered with a more realistic assessment of the likely 'where' of her husband's body:

> *"We walked there, walked our dogs there and we would go back to walk there so it seemed the most natural place for me. In hindsight I think that's my kind of romantic ideal, because I think when you are planning to go missing with an end result, when you are going to end your life, I am not sure you are choosing to go to the most beautiful place, I think you are choosing to go to the place that you won't be found"* (Sasha).

Over time, Sasha has changed her view to incorporate a new, painful imaginary – that of an unknown and hidden location for her husband's body – as she accepts that in 'doing absence', missing people may seek to access precisely: *"the place where you won't be found"* (Sasha).

Geographical imaginations of 'where?' relate to the pragmatic process of search and police liaison, but also the changing ways in which those who are left behind refigure the absent person in their thinking. There is evidence that families try very hard to project, understand and relate to the 'where' of their missing members, and throughout this process, they often start to revision why the absence took place, and we pick this theme up again in section eleven.

SECTION 9
Coping with returns

The majority of missing incidences recorded in the UK result in people returning (seventy per-cent of reported figures for 2011-12: SOCA, 2013), albeit after varying periods of time (see also Tarling and Burrows, 2004; Stevenson et al, 2013). Although these returns are generally linked to relatively short-term missing incidents, there is nothing to suggest that families of longer-term missing people may not benefit and learn from their experience, in preparation for a possible return of their absent family member. Clearly, returns are moments of relief and joy, but also difficulty, and the families below give us valuable insights into what the issues might be:

"I was really annoyed with him and didn't speak to him for about two days. I just couldn't bring myself, so annoyed at what he'd done. But of course on the other hand I was just so glad that he was okay. Because wandering about town at that time of night, it's like, my goodness, anything could have happened" (Lynsey).

"They'll never tell you why they went missing. And we was told never to ask them. If they want to tell you, they tell you. But don't ask because that could just spark them off again. As years went on, we've educated ourselves, like if things get on top of her, this is what she does, this is it" (Samantha).

"She never responds to what she's

done or where she's been or, we've just got into a habit now I suppose, where we haven't, we've stopped asking I think. But because she's never coughed up any information, there's that constant barrier in that area which has stayed there" (Adrian).

The family members above tell different stories of their returns, some of these related to one individual event, and others relating to multiple events, in the context of repeated missing journeys by a family member. In the case of repeated events, families learn not to ask about where and why, in the face of silence, or in light of fear that such questions may provoke an absence. Pauline, below, whose son has been missing multiple times, describes the practical ways in which she deals with a return:

"When he turns up at the house I do the same thing, I rush quickly and get some little snacks and then I am just calm and quiet because anything can happen. So I try and think of things that will keep him there in that place, it happened quite a few times. And anything he says I just go along with it. And I've said 'you were away, you went away. It's nice that you're back' " (Pauline).

Pauline's words show how careful family members can try to be when dealing with a return, treading softly around the issue, and taking care of physical needs first. The difficulty of talking to those who return is raised again and again by those who have had this experience:

"Because I think a lot of the time what causes them to go missing is the fact they're experiencing something that they don't think they can communicate with people and therefore the only way to deal with it is to get away, which isn't actually always that helpful. If they could talk to someone that would be a lot better, and I think it would also help to talk to people afterwards" (Sally).

The fact that support might be derived through talking about missingness is clearly recognised. Indeed, Pauline, above, imagines that missingness is potentially a response to a perceived barrier to communicate feelings and intentions. Families are thus keen to enrol talk as part of a preventative or de-briefing strategy with returnees, however they do not always feel equipped to do this work, and so they suggest that support agencies could be useful here both before the disappearance, and on return. Preparing for return by discussing how one might use verbal, emotional and body cues is highlighted by Judy when she describes a conversation between herself and friends about her son's hopeful return and her probable reactions:

"Friends of us were saying one night 'what would you do if Andrew walked in now?' I said 'Oh my god, I'd give him the biggest hug and tell him how much I loved him and so pleased he's back with us'. And then they said 'yes, but then what would you say to him?' I said 'I'd ask him if he wanted something to eat and drink'. 'But then what would you say to him? Would you kill him?' I went 'no, there would

be no reprisals, there would be no asking what happened to him or what he'd done. I'd just be glad to have him back. And in his own time if he wanted to say, that would be it'. And people that aren't going through this don't understand that. I've noticed that. They just don't seem to understand that you just want them back, there's no conditions, there's no nothing attached to it, you just want them with you, want them back and to be able to love them and show love to them. No questions. Not knowing more than where or what they were doing" (Judy).

As Stevenson et al., (2013) argue, the complexity of reconnection and return in missing situations needs to be fully acknowledged, and families need to be supported to move beyond their initial relief and questions, which don't always address or reference the absence in ways that might prevent its reoccurrence. Opening up spaces of silence about missing issues may help understanding, recovery and prevention for both missing people and their families. None of the interviewees discussed any specific guidance that they had been given by any service about what might be 'best practice' when a missing person returns, or what had worked well for other families, and so these strategies could be further elaborated in existing initiatives and programmes of support. It may be that the charity Missing People could develop new thinking here about how best to prepare families for return scenarios.

Being located by police but not returning

For some families, their experience of missing absence ends with the uncertain and difficult knowledge that their loved one had returned, but does not want family contact. Samantha's words reveal the hurt this can involve for families:

"It's quite hurtful. It's really hurtful because she can't seem to open up to us and we've done a lot for her over the years and she just can't open up. It really hurts. You think 'what have we done? Are we to blame for her being missing?' So you go over things to see if there's an answer, but it's her answer why she won't get in contact with us. It's hard, it's just her own thing. That we're not approachable" (Samantha).

For Samantha, whose sister repeatedly went missing, the temptation was to feel blame, but over time, her experience has taught her to understand her sister's reaction as part of a process of return (her sister usually resumes contact after a few days). For other interviewees who have been informed by the police of a return, they have felt bereft of further information and context about the return and what was actually said about non-contact, as police-led confidentiality and discourse about 'rights-to-be-missing' can mean that minimal information about a located family member is communicated:

"I did spend a bit of time ruminating over it a bit, thinking 'is it just that they can't tell me, or is it because my brother doesn't want me to be told?' So I wish they had clarified

that at the time. I know I could have got back to them and said 'can you just clarify that with me?' But by that time I thought they're on other things, bigger and more hideous things, no doubt. So that was that" (Aileen).

While respecting protocols, police could give more consideration to exactly how contextual information about return is relayed to families, and to make clear exactly that it is police protocol that prevents saying further details being communicated about a missing person who wishes to remain out of contact.

The impact of return for the missing family member

From family perspectives, the impact of return is significant for those that have been missing, especially when people return to small or rural places, where the incidences of such events are low. In two sections of interview, Sally elaborates what it was like for her father to return:

"I mean this is not that sort of place, it's quite small, there's lots of little villages, people don't generally go missing here. I suppose in cities and stuff it's a more regular occurrence. Round here, everyone was like 'oh my God, someone's gone missing' kind of thing, and I think in a way whilst that was good, it then made it harder for my dad when he came back. All the local shops had a picture of him up or something like that. I think he felt quite embarrassed by it, you go missing and you've got to deal with that" (Sally).

"I think my dad's embarrassed by the fact that the Post Office that he went to buy his newspaper and Kit Kat from every single morning had a picture of him up missing and gave CCTV of him to the police and stuff. Now my dad won't go there because he's too embarrassed by it, and I don't think the community has reacted to him any differently, but I think he's reacted to it differently. His embarrassment at what's occurred has caused him to not interact with them, which I think is a bit sad" (Sally).

For Sally's father, the impact of return was intensified because the local community had been enrolled in the search for him. His routine of using local shops – ones that had featured his missing poster - was disrupted, as he felt shame about the event. Such experiences are hard for the individual and the family to manage alone, and advice and intervention about return would be desirable in such circumstances. The fact that missing experience is not something communities feel equipped to deal with – partly because of a lack of discussion around such issues – means that there is a need to address such silence and stigma.

SECTION 10
Community/local social network reactions and support

The experiences of stigma reported above stand in contrast to the ways in which some family members feel supported by their communities, with some finding the extra attention that missing issues bring a welcome source of care:

> *"I found it a positive thing that people were not crossing the street to avoid me or very obviously not bringing it up as a topic of conversation. So I felt it was a gift of the community"* (Tina).

Others reflect that the missing person is forever associated with them, and the event 'stains' their relationships within the local community; either through its mark in everyday conversations, or through the ways in which social contacts avoid them:

> *"The opening line of any meeting in the street actually relates to that and, you know, years and years after. Some people don't know how to deal with it and don't engage, or engage in a different way and some engage in ways at certain times that feels very clumsy, and it just affects a much wider relationship than your particular relationship with your particular family about your missing person"* (Jay).

In reflecting on such instances, Raquelle, below, speculates that these reactions are because most people do not know how to respond to missing experience. Human absence is an uncomfortable

reality, especially when it cannot be explained, and it is difficult for some people to know what can be said in relation to it. There was also a sense for some in which community silence or avoidance was read as a way of conveying judgement about the family left behind:

> *"I don't think sometimes they know what to say, and then sometimes I don't know what to say, I don't want to be anything else other than me. I don't want to be the sister of the missing person, I still want to be me, but I do find that when I do go back to my hometown I feel, maybe I'm paranoid but I feel that I'm being judged because of how she was and what she went through"* (Raquelle).

This is an aspect of missing experience that family members found particularly difficult, and this prompted some people to move house or withdraw from social situations and networks:

> *"It's a small village, and they would notice that he wasn't about, the car wasn't there. I just couldn't face people. I didn't know what had happened to my husband. I couldn't face the questions. I couldn't even face the day to day of going through trying to be normal"* (Gladys).

> *"You're a very private person, but suddenly you're this person that is on the news and in the paper. I knew when I was going round Asda, you saw people going 'that's her'. So I found that really difficult, suddenly being a very private person to being chucked into all of that"* (Alice).

Apart from general issues of contact, care, avoidance, and privacy that emerged in relation to discussions of community reactions to the family left behind, some interviewees commented on the content of what was said and the ways in which this content was framed:

> *"Some people are very direct and say 'have you heard anything? How's things? How's your dad?' And I would rather people were like that. But some people you just feel are wanting to know what's going on, but just won't come out with it. I find that hard"* (Paul).

When neighbours asked only tentative questions, or don't extend conversations beyond a cursory enquiry, families find it difficult to know quite how to respond or prompt further talk:

> *"I've got my old neighbours there, I'll just say 'my sister went missing', but they're the type of people that wouldn't go into depth with you, just say 'oh, I hope she's found okay' but that's all she would say"* (Samantha).

The responsibility of finding an appropriate language to frame talk with communities about human absence seems to often reside with the individual experiencing the loss:

> *"When I say now Paul's missing, I want them to ask me questions. I actually want them to show some interest and not just go 'oh, right'. and walk away. Because you need to talk, you do need to talk"* (Charlotte).

Having only limited social engagement with local communities about the missing person was interpreted by some interviewees as a rejection of their missing person. This rejection had implications for future conversations and how individuals are able to find ways to live with absence. In contrast, families anticipate others' interest in their situation, and as a result everyday words and phrases, such as 'how are you?' take on ambiguous meaning. This uncertainty limits the possibilities of 'usually' taken for granted forms of interactions, as Alice discusses:

> *"When somebody asks you how you are, well, I personally wonder what they're meaning. Are they asking how am I, just 'how are you doing?' Or are they asking 'have you heard anything?' So I don't know if that's just me over thinking it or if that is what people are asking. So I probably over-think an awful lot now"* (Alice).

Rather than ask for clarification or bring up the missing situation, some families kept quiet. Furthermore, there was often a perceived uncertainly over exactly what telling the wider local community could achieve. In situations where the missing person has repeatedly gone missing and always returned, families expressed ambivalence about disclosing the absence:

> *"We keep it quiet, we don't say anything. We don't go, well there's not a lot they could do anyway is there. I mean what that young man a couple of doors away went on the bike once and found her, which was brilliant but I don't know how that happened, that seemed like an amazing bit of good fortune that he should just ride down the road and see her, but other than that no real connection with neighbours on it"* (Adrian).

> *"I think the people who know my mum and my sister know not to mention it. It has become an unmentionable thing really"* (Sally).

Such experiences as those reported above show how the ripple effects of ambiguous loss influence the ways in which families communicate absence. For some families one way to cope with the uncertainty of their situation was to require direct forms of communication:

> *"I think because there's so much uncertainty in my life, I'd rather folk were just direct with me. I can't be doing with uncertainty any more"* (Alice).

There was a distinctive need to garner support through conversation, but on the family's own terms, and with whom they are close and can trust for support. With this as the motivation, Judy and her husband quickly identified close friends with whom they can be direct and explain when talk is an option:

> *"At the beginning we did say to a couple of close friends 'please don't leave us alone' because a few of them would text and say 'we'll bring dinner round to you, we'll come round or you can come to us whenever you want, but if you just want to be left alone let us know'. We texted back and said 'no, please*

don't leave us alone at the moment. If you come round and we say we don't want to talk or we don't want to do anything, just sit there, we'll go and make a cup of tea, but don't leave us alone. Don't stay away' " (Judy).

When conversation is prompted by outsiders, but family-led, interviewees find informal support from friends or family to be enormously comforting and the process of talking extremely helpful.

Building a language in the community

As shown above, families can find it hard to confide in others, unsure what to say, or of the reaction conversations about missingness might elicit. Finding the words to talk about human absence requires a tremendous strength and courage, for the reasons Laura explains:

> *"I would avoid the conversation if Jim was mentioned. I would literally not say anything. I didn't know what to say. But somebody actually said to me this week 'where's Jim? How's he doing?' And I said 'I don't know, he's missing'. And it just goes dead because they don't know what to say. It's like you've said they're dead. And they don't know what to ask. I'm getting better at saying it"* (Laura).

Although missing absence is often compared to traumatic situations, such as grief arising as a result of bereavement, there is a limited discursive life around lived missing experience. The limited shared language about absence means that families and members of the public alike find it equally challenging to know how to converse with one another about these issues, and this can lead to feelings of isolation, loneliness and despair. Yet, some families had clear advice for others on how to build supportive communications, as Judy suggests:

> *"The worst thing people can be is guarded. The best thing is to say 'I don't know what to say. I don't know how to manage this situation, but to tell you we're here if you want anything' "* (Judy).

Campaigns that raise awareness of missing issues will help public conversations about missing experience, and give families and communities a new language through which to discuss human absence.

SECTION 11
Living with missing experience

"As soon as someone goes missing, I think one of the things that crosses your mind is what's going to happen if you never find them?" (Sally).

The potential for loss to be never ending can be crippling. To be left behind with little or no concrete evidence of where a loved one has gone, and if they will return, is one of the hardest experiences a family can face:

"This is just so totally not like him, and that's what I can't get my head round, the fact that we've not had a postcard saying 'I'm sorry, miss you'. Or anything" (Laura).

Although it is recognized that adults have a right to go absent, families often struggle to cope with the possibility that their missing person has left deliberately and without trace, especially when it seems out of character. Regardless of the time period concerned, families long for some form of communication that would signal connection or resolution, and help them to transition away from feeling ambiguous loss.

Living with shadows

Although the potential for new search leads and actions reduce over time, ambiguity remains, so rather than decrease or diminish into acceptance, an increased need for resolution may occur for those left behind. Part of this relates to the ways in which missing situations provoke questions that trigger

'shadow grief' (Horacek, 1995). This term references a sense of loss that persists and is part of a continuing relationship with the missing person, and as Gladys explains:

> *"I don't know what to do any more. I just don't know what to do. Which is the frustrating and really sad part. You've come to a dead end, it's really frustrating. It's one of two times I could actually bang my head against a wall. I just want to know. I don't want to harm anybody, I don't want to ruin anybody's life. And to be perfectly honest with you, I wouldn't be happy with just a letter, I would like just one face to face, but only to see that face. I don't want to barge in and destroy anybody's life, it's not what I'm about. I just want peace of mind for myself. That's all I want, just peace of mind and to stop this never ending frustration and sadness"* (Gladys).

Families live through months or years without news or resolution. Life changes around them, but the only certainty they have about the missing person is from a time before their disappearance. The passage of time means the missing persons' life is likely to have altered from point of last contact, and accordingly family priorities can also change from them desiring a return to craving peace-of-mind through reconnection as a means to stop indefinite suffering. Until such a time, families develop strategies in an attempt to live with absence, such as concentrating on practical issues, keeping busy to try to block out the pain, and seeking the support of others (see Holmes, 2008). As Raquelle discusses, another strategy to gain control and feel comfort is to anthropomorphise 'the shadow' of missingness and recognize it as enmeshed in everyday life:

> *"I just would like to scream it sometimes, 'enough, I can't do it anymore, enough, just let me know for god's sake what's happened because we can't do it anymore'. So that's why I call it my shadow because it's there and that's quite nice to put it there because it never leaves me, it never leaves me so it's always there and I can kind of get up in the morning and go 'right then, you coming? Because you're going to follow me, I ain't following you' and get on with my day. Yes, it's my shadow"* (Raquelle).

Learning to live with the constant demands of absent-presence in missing situations is complex, and interviewees found it emotionally hard to use time that could be spent searching to engage with leisure activities or celebrations:

> *"If I go to the ballet at the weekend there is a little bit of you that says 'oh you could have been looking at the map' "* (Sasha).

The need to remain alert and aware for long periods of time readying themselves for the potential trace of the missing person is experienced as a form of 'hyper-vigilance' and is a well recognised problem (FFMPU, 2010). As a result of the long term effects of hyper-vigilance, family members are sometimes reluctant to leave home, even for short periods, or they put contingencies in place:

> *"Late Friday night, stayed there*

Saturday and came home Sunday. So I think that's the longest I've been away since Andrew went missing. I [texted] him, that's where we were going. And I said the keys are in the usual place if you want to come home" (Judy).

Changing understandings of missing

Family members report that they can understand why a person might have thoughts of going missing, but coping with the reality of an actual disappearance is still extremely challenging:

> *"It's like I think most people get to a certain point in their lives when they feel they could quite happily walk out the door and not come back again, but for someone to actually take that step you kind of always think it's like quite a massive thing"* (Sally).

Until a loved one is located or returned many express the impossibility of giving up or 'moving on', as doing all that they can to find their missing person is a way of continuing to show their commitment and love for them. Yet, with the passage of time, the ways that some families worked with their loss and searched for their missing person transitioned, and for a few interviewees they described the ways that 'active' searching is repositioned to practices of looking and remembering:

> *"I'll always be looking for him. Yeah, okay, I'm not going out there doing massive publicity things or anything, but I'll always be looking for him. That will never, ever stop"* (Gladys).

As Gladys describes, and is common in other long-term missing situations, a transition occurs that allows a moving forward rather than moving on. Thus the ambiguity of 'not knowing' sometimes transforms into an 'everyday remembrance', lived out through muted practices of looking, and a latent awareness that the missing person is still present in their lives via memory work, rather than through a constant 'active' search. More research is needed on how this process manifests itself, and how 'memory practices' might be usefully enrolled within support services.

Impacts on family health

Interviewees talked about the different ways loss impacted on themselves and the remaining family as a whole, and on their relationships with one another. The impacts of having a loved one go missing are known to be considerable, ranging from emotional disturbance and psychological pain to physical pain or symptoms (see Holmes, 2008), as Gladys describes:

> *"In the first two years all my hair went very, very thin. You know, stress, very stressed and ill. Didn't really feel like carrying on sometimes. I just couldn't see the point. I didn't want to live for the first couple of years"* (Gladys).

As in Holmes (2008), our family members highlighted a range of health issues, such as weight loss, hair thinning, sleep disruption or insomnia and depression that they experience in living with

the missing situation. Ill-health may also amplify negative feelings and interviewees related the uncertainty of the situation to a lack of desire to live without their missing person. Long term uncertainly seems to produce a kind of trauma which impacts both physically and psychologically and can pervade all aspects of life for those left behind:

> *"I think we're probably more accepting of it. We'll never understand it. Probably everybody's nerves were shot to bits completely. Your whole sense of security is shot to bits"* (Alice).

As a result of missing situations, family members often question their 'ontological security', their taken-for-granted experience of their place in everyday life, and as a result can experience dark or disturbing thoughts that they find hard to share:

> *"It's a stressful, stressful time for a family, it really is. And your mind, you just can't describe your mind, you're like in another world. You're just thinking 'is it real? Are you dreaming? Is it true? Is she away or is it just something I've been dreaming about?' Just stupid thoughts going through your head, that's the description"* (Samantha).

Simultaneously living in a shared and individualised reality produces 'dream like states' for some who live with missing loss. A few families report engaging in formal sources of support and talking therapies, to help relate the trauma of the situation, enabling its telling beyond just internal worlds, and facilitating a working-through of such experiences:

> *"Once I had got over the initial shock and I was having intensive counselling, I was seeing a counsellor on a weekly basis and I was working through, yes I am going through a grief process"* (Sasha).

There are few options for dedicated therapeutic support for families of missing people in the UK and many of the interviewees didn't access such services, and this might be a focus of campaign work of the national charity, Missing People.

Emotions and time

> *"I think if we could pinpoint whatever emotion we were feeling at any time it would make things easier to deal with, but you can't explain to somebody what it's like or how it feels because you don't really understand what your feelings are half the time anyway"* (Raquelle).

Raquelle goes on to further suggest that the confused spectrum of emotion - from anxiety to anger - experienced when a family member first goes missing does not necessarily diminish over time, instead the temporality with which feelings arise and their strength alters:

> *"You could list the emotions where you've got grief, you've got anger, jealousy, you have frustration, all of those things you have, confusion and everything, all of those emotions you have right from the word go, the only difference is that each time you feel each of these emotions there is just a bit of a longer gap*

between them whereas the first year it's every day, all of those emotions all the time, like a hurricane in your head" (Raquelle).

For many, the feelings experienced don't get any easier, but some families do revise their relationship to missing experience and insist on moving forward from accounts of loss and helplessness - while still acknowledging that they experience these feelings - to a story of action and effort, although these are often transitions that take place over many years. Imaginative work plays a large part in any re-visioning of relationships within missing situation, as it is believed to play an important psychological function allowing families to cope with unresolved questions and character contradictions (Morrell, 2011; Clarke, 2011). One part of that imaginative speculation is usually around whether the person has intentionally gone missing:

"It's a bit of moving on, but it's also realising that he's made his decision. He's made that decision to go, for whatever reason, we don't know what that is and we haven't got any control over that. So I've always been somebody with 'you can only control what you can control'. So therefore we might as well get on with what we're doing. If he wanted to come back, as long as we leave the mechanism in place for him to come back and we put everything out inviting him to come back, that's as much as we could do. I think we've coped by being able to reassure ourselves we've done as much as we could" (Charles).

The desire to move forward from accounts of loss and helplessness can be dependent on being able to re-vision individual agency in missing situations, as Charles suggests. For families to work towards an acceptance of the possibility that the ambiguous loss maybe indefinite, and simultaneously keep alive the hope that if the door remains open, that the person may return, is all part of re-visioning the missing relationship. For some families, not being able to re-vision the person they know with the person who is missing means the ongoing questioning of the missing person via a 'stuck' or 'frozen' relation, as Jay expresses:

"Had he taken off to France to work? [...] he'd taken off to Spain to work and he had great ambitions to do more music and [...] I mean the things that was consistently wrong about any of these story's was, it was almost not conceivable that he would be in his right mind and not communicate with any of us" (Jay).

Jay's experience was common to all the interviewees at different moments, and most spoke of the seeming impossibility of constructing an acceptable narrative around why, where or how a loved one has disappeared. In this sense, 'missing' is a unique situational crisis that is rarely an expected event, and families require practical and emotional support in missing situations, regardless of duration or repeated experiences, to help assist them with telling their story.

Morrell (2011: 21) describes how 'families enter a new world when they experience someone going missing and for many having someone to help them understand the process, explain what they need to

do, and remember in the long term that they have someone missing is crucial'. With limited dedicated or specialist therapeutic support available interviewees found their needs often went unmet. However, as Raquelle explains, the UK Missing People charity is trying to address this:

> *"It's brilliant for people that are going through it. The Mindfulness sheet and the 'Living Better in Limbo' are absolutely fantastic"* (Raquelle).

Families engaged with Missing People found their services extremely helpful in enabling them to feel better able to cope with having someone missing over time, however, not all families in this study knew of the charity or what support was available, and further awareness work needs to take place in some regions and via police referral.

SECTION 12
Constructing 'durable biographies' of missing people?

In this penultimate section of the report, we respond to the traumatic testimony outlined above to suggest some new ways in which we might work with the experience of missingness, and we draw on academic scholarship below in order to do this.

As we have summarised above, families of missing people have reported multiple elements of profound loss in their on-going search for their missing relatives, but find it difficult to move forward in constructions of 'normal grieving' without a body or a note or a return:

> *"You are just drawn back to the search because that is the only purpose in my life [is] to find my child, and I am sorry that I can't do what people try and push you to do, you know, get on with your life. My life ended when I lost him and I just exist now until I find him, well hopefully I find him"* (Daniela).

In long term missing situations, it is often the case that there is strongly felt need to 'redefine life around the trauma' rather than 'survive the experience' (Morell, 2011: 21) as Misha explains:

> *"What you really have to learn is to incorporate it into your life and live with that ambiguous loss"* (Misha).

Families were not always sure exactly how to incorporate missingness into their everyday life, as the states they find themselves in as a result of ambiguous

loss are so disorientating. Nonetheless, many try to do this, as Sasha's comments suggest:

> *"I was [trying to] find [...] something that allowed you to do [that as] presumption of death closes that and actually celebrates the life that's lived rather than the life that is dragging on"* (Sasha).

Interviewees express the importance of finding new ways of living with absence in a manner that allows them to still discuss and retain the essence or character of their missing loved one. This is seen by some as an essential part of moving forward, rather than moving on, and is different to usual accounts of the grieving process following a death. For some, part of this complex process is about trying to create an adequate space of recognition for the missing person, and social media can be one such space in which these ambitions are realised:

> *"To share memories of him and keep people seeing his beautiful smile, of him growing up and its there on record now. I have it to share memories and the song I had written and composed for Christopher. She wrote that as if she had known Christopher all his life and me and the search and it was very pointed at the authorities, which I was really shocked [...]. It is also there for those that know what happened to him. It's a reminder, they can see his face, his family, who we have lost and who we are"* (Daniela).

Daniela's use of social media helps construct a complex witness of her son and references a politics of his disappearance, via photography, song lyrics and pointed comment on those authorities that search. Such testimony suggests that there is more work to do on how families witness and remember the missing, and it is to this matter that we now turn to in conclusion.

Missing loss, as described in the pages above, might be best conceived as a traumatic experience, and indeed many interviewees described traumatic spaces of 'limbo', or what Wayland (2007) calls 'the space in between' grief and trauma. Such states and spaces might be ones where talking about the missing person is not always felt possible or even desirable; as Tamas (2009: para. 11) puts it, when she says that trauma 'leaves me lost and speechless [...], what breaks my heart also breaks my tongue'. Although some family members were lucky enough to be surrounded by a strong friendship network, allowing them to speak of their loss, and the missing person, regularly and when they chose, for others this was not the case. The lack of a legitimate space in which to discuss not only feelings of missing loss, but also the character of the missing person, can be understood as a profound lack, and one which contributes to feelings of stasis, as Daniela describes as she says: *"you're just left in a limbo and there's nothing anyone can do about it"*. Turning to some ideas in grief scholarship has helped us to find ways of addressing this static dilemma, and we summarise some of this thinking here.

Recent grief scholarship has largely orientated around commentary on how

continuing bonds with the dead enable a lived life for those left behind, and venerates the role of spoken narrative (talk) as one link in the vital relations between the dead and the living. There is emphasis here on grieving as a social and cultural project, rather than as a narrow occupation of recovery stages. While using this basic idea in the context of missing people, it is important to state that we are precisely not suggesting that families of missing people straightforwardly feel 'grief', although this may be the only language available to them to express missing loss. Indeed, many explicitly address this distinction in interview, as this quote suggests:

> *"I have coped with a lot over the years but this is something completely different from other things. Grief is one thing, this is grieving and not grieving all at the same time, it's really weird, really very strange"* (Judy).

Nor are we suggesting that the missing are like the dead; indeed, they are differently absent. Nonetheless, we draw on the usefulness of the concept from grief scholarship advanced by Walters (1996) on the 'durable biographies' of the absent dead, but seek to use it differently in respect to thinking further about how to act in the face of missing loss, and the practices of remembering the missing person.

In Walter's (1996) early work, he argues it is in the establishing of *durable characterful biographies* of the dead, ones fully talked about by those left behind, that is central to recoveries from abject or ruminating grief. In establishing durable biographies – in which spoken character witness is important – Walters suggests that the relatives of the dead benefit from co-constructing a discursive narrative of the dead which pictures a life lived with an ending, but *a life that also continues through the on-going biographies of the mourners.* Here, Walters adds, bereavement counselling may have a role, but he critiques the standard approaches of this kind of intervention as one that focuses mostly on the *feelings* of the bereaved and not 'talk' about the character of the dead, which he argues is unhelpful in the grieving process.

We have rehearsed the essence of Walter's argument here because we think there are potentially interesting routes for conceiving of the struggles of families to emotionally make sense of missing loss, and remember their missing members. If renewed attention could be directed to ways of discussing, and gathering and retaining character witness, not only as a function of police work, but also as an important form of cultural work, then *a version* of durable biographies for missing people may be possible. In part, this is about trying to create an adequate narrative space of recognition for the missing, as well as of talk about them. Although we have heard that social media is one such space for some families, for others this is not enough, nor an option, and so the struggle for 'missing talk' of the character that is missing is an *on-going* struggle. Emotional difficulty may arise because any 'durable biography' of the missing is hard to incorporate into a wider family narrative identity because of the partiality that it represents. The lack of knowledge of the missing makes constructing *continuing* relationships

between the individual biography and wider family narratives hard, especially if there is conflict or stigma over character witnessing (as is likely in cases of shocking and sudden human absence).

However, and despite these difficulties, listening to how some families use their geographical imaginations about their missing members may be instructive. Laura, below, retains an open geographical imagination about her son and where he might be:

> *"I would imagine that he was dead in ditch, that he was living homeless on the streets, that he was starving. That was hard. I had to stop myself doing it because I was basically making myself ill. So now I imagine him that he's working in a bar in Ibiza and having a great social life and he's on the beach during the day and he's got a suntan"* (Laura).

For several families of the longer-term missing, they deliberately employ quite expansive geographical imaginations in their constant questions of 'where are they?' and such active character-witnessing work has been built into new projections of their missing members which might see them as streetwise and networked in new places, if still unbearably missing to and in their old lives. This, we would insist, is not just damaging illusion or fantasy, but an active process whereby the biography of the missing is *held open, as continuing,* and as related to their new possible lives and geographies. In part this is based on their known character preferences, as well as difficult family work which accepts that a form of biographical revision may have happened *without them and at a distance.* We cast this as an unstable, but *potentially* helpful way, to approach the ambiguity of durable biographies and character witnessing of the missing, one that finds a productive place for the constant 'where?' question. Boss (1999: 132), a therapist with families of missing people, discusses this potential as helpful:

> *'Those who wait endlessly for news about a lost person do not do so in vain if they find hope and optimism in their struggle. Indeed, they are able to find meaning in the midst of ambiguity because of their ability to remain optimistic, creative and flexible'.*

Boss and Carnes (2012) more recently elaborate the potential of 'dialectical thinking', and enabling families to talk positively about 'both' 'and' scenarios: e.g. I have a son *and* he is missing, he is present *and* absent. For those families who find ways to live with this notion and talk about the expansive possible geographies of 'where?', there are perhaps new ways of creating a discursive life around the character of the missing. This tactic may respond to a deep need to communicate, to talk about them, and to have this talk recognised, as Charlotte relates:

> *"When I say now Paul's missing, I want them to ask me questions. I actually want them to show some interest and not just go 'oh, right' and walk away. Because you need to talk, you do need to talk"* (Charlotte).

We propose there is a need to find both service-specific, but also more collective

ways of valuing and responding to character of those missing and talking about those who are missing; acceptable ways for families to retain a discursive life for those who are absent, and not see this as just a form of 'complicated grief' or 'search work', but rather as a space of recognition and a potential space of re-vision around a durable, if uncertain, biography.

We ask what this might this look like in practice? Wayland, who writes in an Australian context about ways forward for counselling families of missing people, argues that they need to be enabled to 'reanimate' the missing so 'they can reclaim the missing person as a person; their identity is not defined by the fact they are missing' (2007: 13), and that this may happen by small celebrations of the story and person so far. This can in part happen by generating 'ideas about how the missing person can be celebrated'. This may take the form of story-telling, photography or film, or events which continue to celebrate the person's life, as part of an on-going family, an on-going strategy of lives still lived. This is not quite the same as remembering the dead; as here, families may also hold open the possibility that the absent missing may one day *speak back* to who they were and are, and address their place in such family narratives. These are clearly speculative ideas, but ones families, charities, trauma experts and researchers might wish to discuss further as empowering possibilities for 'talking back' to missing loss through constructing rich, durable narratives of the characters of those who are absent. We suggest, then, that there are new kinds of cultural projects connected to talk, and memory work related to those who are missing, orientated to who they are, and this is *somewhere* we might wish to go with missing experience.

SECTION 13
Recommendations and further research

The sections above have suggested multiple learning points, or calls for further action and research evidence and here we summarise our recommendations from this report:

LEARNING POINTS

- Good practice examples of partnership working in missing investigations should be shared via police education and training.
- It should be recognised that regular communication and updates via the use of single points of contact or Family Liasion Officers (FLOs) constitute best practice in missing person enquiries.
- Police officers should agree regular call times for news sharing with families, and in long-term cases, they should call every few months for updates and information sharing.
- Working in partnership with families can produce benefit and value-added to police investigations and working with families should be more than 'managing expectations'.
- Families need to understand that their witness statement has been well recorded and valued by investigating officers. The police have a duty of care to explain the purpose of witness statements and how they have been properly handled.
- The Missing People charity should continue to provide a range of advice literature for families about emotional and practical support

services, but increase provision about planning for return/reconnection and memory work.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Consultation with families of missing people should be at the heart of service development and planning in relation to missing issues and guidance.
- The police have a role in reducing experiences of trauma in missing situations by promoting family partnership work and new guidance could take account of this role.
- Police and family investigation strategies should be managed in relation to one another and not just in parallel.
- Police officers should plan for medium and long-term missing investigations to involve a sharing of search tasks with families as part of active partnership work.
- Provision of empathetic and clear communication and liaison pathways between the police and families of missing people is a key area in need of standardisation and improvement in the UK.
- Families in medium and long-term cases should be notified when officers change on the case and should be introduced to new officers in a professional hand-over.
- The appointment of local force 'champions' for long-term cases of missing people can act in the interest of the family and promote local investment in case resolution.
- The Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO), the UK Missing Person Bureau, and Police Scotland should encourage police forces to inform the family members of missing people about the range of support services available to them as standard.
- Police officers could be required to carry an 'aide memoire' of best practice in missing person cases, and the above agencies should evaluate this option.
- The Missing People charity could increase awareness of its services by campaigning for police use of an 'aide memoire' that requires all officers to pass on the details of the charity in each missing persons case.
- The Missing People charity could invest in on-going research relationships that explore further the memory practices and experiences of living with missing loss, amongst families of missing people.

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Technical appendix

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The research findings presented in this report are drawn from a larger ESRC funded study, the '*Geographies of Missing People'*. The data presented here drew its sample from two police forces and the UK Missing People charity database.

ETHICS

The research was carried out in line with the Data Protection Act 1998 and the Faculty of Law, Business and Social Sciences Ethics Committee of the University of Glasgow granted full ethical approval. During the project participants have been afforded confidentiality, all gave informed consent, and were free to withdraw from the process at any time without having to give reason.

As the police service and Missing People charity were partners in the recruitment process this presented ethical challenges around confidentiality and anonymity for those who wish to take part, as well as legal issues in relation to data protection. To limit these complexities and take seriously the issue of confidentiality it was made clear to interviewees that whilst researchers were being introduced via police letter or charity phone call/email that they were simply working *through* these agencies rather than *for* them.

All interviews were conducted in line with ethical guidance issued by the project funder – Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) – and prior findings on trauma and loss (Fravel et al., 1992; Boss, 1996, 2002; DePrince et al., 2006). Extra care was taken to address the worries and concerns of interviewees if revealed that they have or had mental health problems. To further safeguard interviewee' rights, a third party contact within the University of Glasgow, both police forces and the Missing People charity was made available in case family members wanted to speak about their participation and the issues raised.

Finally, the benefits to families of taking part in the research were identified not only by the authors, but also by the interviewees themselves as they valued the opportunity to talk about this profound life-event. The notion of research interviews providing 'serendipitous therapy' has been raised by others (see Holmes, 2008), and is an important factor in balancing risk with the importance and usefulness of the research outcomes.

GENERATING THE SAMPLE AND NEGOTIATING ACCESS

The project is qualitative and therefore cannot seek to be representative of all families living with missing experience. Further the method of postal recruitment via letter and charity phone call/email

meant that those who responded determined the final sample, although procedures were put in place to invite a range of families to participate.

All family participants were sampled from Police Scotland, MPS and the UK charity Missing People database. The size and type of the particular database varied by agency and region. In Police Scotland, the sample was generated from missing persons cases from the Grampian region only. MPS has thirty two London boroughs and a sample was generated of all families reporting a person missing to the London boroughs of Islington and, Hammersmith and Fulham and across all MPS boroughs for families of post-fourteen day missing persons. Within the charity, the sample was generated via families who completed their annual Family Feedback survey and expressed that they would be happy to be contacted for research purposes. Further opportunities for recruitment were generated via the charity run family support days and the annual Christmas carol service.

The sample frame was developed in consultation with both police forces and Missing People and excluded family cases where the missing person was under eighteen years, could potentially have participated in other parts of the study, was a lost contact case rather than a police case, had dementia, was forced into being missing, had an incomplete addresses or had no fixed abode and where the person reporting was not a direct relative or kin, for example a member of hospital staff. To maximise family participation rates, we did not sample for the inclusion of particular family members nor timeframes other than to proactively sample for hundred per-cent of post-fourteen day cases to ensure that the project had the opportunity to potentially interview families of longer-term missing persons and those where the person might still be missing.

In each force, the researchers were allocated a designated police point of contact to send a standardised letter to a relevant sample of families of missing people within a pre-defined period. For both forces this was 2011. The letter provided potential participants with full details of the research and consent forms along with a self-addressed envelope for return direct to the research team if they were willing to participate in the study. In the charity, a designated representative contacted families - who had completed the 2011 Family Feedback Survey - via email or phone seeking their permission to send them details of the study for their consideration. If granted, the same letter out procedure was adopted but families were given the choice if they wished to receive this via email or in the post.

To comply with the Data Protection Act 1998, the names and contact details of the persons receiving the invitation to join the research project were not known nor held by the research team in the first instance and it was only if a family member replied directly to the Research Fellow with their contact details or agreed to have their information passed to the researcher that they could be contacted. In Police Scotland for the Grampian region, a total of 333 letters from the police were issued to family addresses for individuals reported missing in 2011. For the MPS 668 letters were sent to

family addresses of those reported as missing from the same time period. The total response for Police Scotland was five and MPS was seven giving an overall response rate of 1.3 per-cent. The Missing People charity made fifty phone calls, but contact was not always achieved. Out of a possible fifty people, eight people responded positively from this method. To generate further responses, the charity facilitated recruitment via their family support days and Christmas carol service and this resulted in a further seven respondents. From a total of twenty-seven possible respondents, twenty-five interviews took place over a five month period during 2012 – 2013. There is likely to have been multiple reasons that might have deterred the sample population from taking part in the research, such as receiving a letter from the police along with project information or the emotional rawness of the situation rendering them unable to speak about it. However, as families of missing people cross cut all sections of society and the police and Missing People charity are the main agencies that work with families of missing people, this was the most robust access route available within the parameters of the project. The significant effort to gain twenty-five interviews from such a high volume sample reflects the difficulty in accessing families of missing people and further reflects the importance of this work.

Negotiating access was complex and designed to respond to the needs and rights of the participants. From the twenty-seven adults who agreed to be contacted all were telephoned or emailed by the Research Fellow within a week of first contact for an initial conversation. When telephone contact was achieved the Research Fellow explained the project again and the range of options open for taking part (face-to-face or telephone interviews and focus groups) and what it might involve, asked if they had any questions, answered these and talked through the next steps should they like to be involved. Also during this conversation the Research Fellow took details of their missing person and the circumstances surrounding the missing situation. A follow up letter was then issued which outlined in extensive detail information on: confidentiality; background to the research; what an interview would entail; what will happen to the interview material; likely media interest; their rights as participant's; how to get in touch; and planned dissemination events. A follow-up telephone conversation ensued and it was only at this stage, and if appropriate, that arrangements to interview at a time and in a location of the families choosing were made.

The twenty-five interviews took a range of formats and locations. Due to the varied recruitment strategy interviewees were based all over the UK. Four interviewees contacted via the Missing People charity took part in a face-to-face focus group. Of the remaining twenty-one, six were on the telephone and fifteen were face-to-face in a location chosen by the interviewee. Of the twenty-five interviews, two were conducted with couples and twenty-three were with single family members. Table one on page 19 summarises the relationship between the interviewee and the missing person, and indicates whether they have been found and how long they have been missing.

INTERVIEW TOPICS AND INTERVIEWS

Families were interviewed with a semi-structured research schedule that reflected the concerns of an interdisciplinary academic-police research team that wanted to collect data on the search experiences of families. Topics and associated questions related to the aims of the project were directly designed to ensure relevant service delivery.

Of the twenty-five families interviewed, eleven had relatives who were still missing and so two interview schedules were designed to take account of this. Also as four participants wished to take part in a focus group a further schedule was created to work for the group. Each interview schedule was planned so as to cover the same range of topics, as well as reflect the stage of missing experience. Only the topics covered in interviews with families of returned missing people are shown here:

- Lead up to the disappearance
- Initial thoughts
- Reporting the person missing
- Search
- Family search and making your own enquiries

The aftermath: family search experiences in the hours, days and weeks after the disappearance:

- Search
- Family search once reported
- Police search
- Geographical imagination
- Emotional strategies

Support services, police experience, missing people, the media and any other statutory, voluntary or informal support providers:

- Police-family liaison
- Support agencies
- Media

The end of the search: how the missing person comes to return and the legacy of the experience:

- Located
- Return
- Re/placing yourself and your family in the world
- Repeat
- Critical moments
- Impact
- Advice
- Other points

In total twenty-five interviews with families of missing people were conducted during 2012 and 2013. The first two interviews were conducted as a pilot phase. For the pilot interviews, both face-to-face, an in-depth interview, facilitated by a semi-structured approach, was assumed in order to sense the suitability of the interview schedule. It was apparent during this phase that the structure of the schedule worked well, but that it was important to provide ample space within the interview for families to talk about their missing relative alongside the specifics of the interview questions. This meant that interviews were lengthy and it wasn't possible to ask all the questions on the schedule. In this way then 'the story' was allowed to dominate the structure of the interview, and the interviewer worked with this 'returning' to component parts of the narrative to

focus in on families experiences and to ask core questions identified under each topic. In-depth interviews were planned with each direction of questioning always being supplemented by 'how' and 'why' follow-up questions to enable in-depth responses. Examples were asked for at multiple points, but leading questions (e.g. 'naming emotions' that could have been felt) were avoided. The questions were designed to be broad and open, inviting semi-structured narrative responses. The same process was implemented through all interviews regardless of proximity and focus-group.

The focus group lasted a little over an hour and the interviews ranged from two hours to two and half hours. Interviews were conducted in a way that suited the interviewee, such as either at home or in a public place, face-to-face or on the telephone, single or group, at a time that suited them and with the vast majority of interviewees wishing to meet at home. All interviews and the focus group were recorded on a digital recorder with the permission of the respondent and later transcribed verbatim. All interview data have been anonymised and confidential as standard. All names within this report and other project materials are pseudonyms.

The potential for family members to become distressed during interviews and the focus group was recognised. This was limited by a sensitive orientation towards the interviewees needs. At the beginning of the interview/focus group participants were informed of their rights and made aware that they didn't have to speak about topics or disclose any information they felt uncomfortable in so doing. Interviews had breaks and pause points built in with the option to stop altogether to mitigate for tiredness. Interviewees were often emotional (and displayed tears, anger, frustration etc.) and required willingness on behalf of the interviewer to work with the uncertainty presented, as well as a high degree of empathy. All interviewees thanked the Research Fellow for the opportunity to talk about their experience of having a family member go missing in a sensitive and caring way, often commenting that no one had asked them about their experience in quite this way before, and that it was especially good to concentrate on the search and police-family liaison aspects of the experience. Families were also pleased to have the opportunity to talk about the specificity of *their* missing member and witness their character within an interview situation. Finally, a debrief took place after interviews to discuss any upsetting memories or feelings that might have been unearthed as part of the interview and an information leaflet with sources of support and local resources available was issued to every participant.

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

Interviews were coded and explored in order to make sense of the materials. Initial interview coding involved breaking the data into units of analysis, which were developed on the basis of discussions within the research team, discussion with the advisory group, analysis of geographical and missing literatures and driven by content of a subset of interviews. These initial codes were then reformulated through a process of analytical induction, where by provisional themes were refined as more interviews

were analysed. Data was further analysed thematically, to explore the associations between families and key dimensions of missing experience, not only in terms of the emotional consequences of such absence, but also in terms of what family say of their experience of searching, and their experience of communicating with police officers about that search and the Missing People charity. A content and thematic analysis identified information for policy and practice relevant research findings and conceptual categorizations.

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