JOURNAL OF HOMICIDE AND MAJOR INCIDENT INVESTIGATION

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About the Journal

The Journal of Homicide and Major Incident Investigation encourages practitioners and policy makers to share their professional knowledge and practice. The journal is published twice a year on behalf of the National Policing Homicide Working Group (HWG).

It contains papers on professional practice, procedure, legislation and developments which are relevant to those investigating homicide and major incidents.

All contributions have been approved by the Editorial Board of the HWG. Articles are based on the authors' operational experience or research. The views expressed are those of the authors and do not represent those of NPCC. Unless otherwise indicated they do not represent national policy. Readers should refer to relevant policies and practice advice before implementing any advice contained in this journal.

The Journal is edited by Peter Stelfox on behalf of the National Policing Homicide Working Group.

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About the National Policing Homicide Working Group

The National Policing Homicide Working Group (HWG) is part of the Violence Portfolio within National Policing Crime Business Area. It develops national policy and practice for the investigation of homicide, major incidents and other serious crimes.

The HWG also supports and promotes the training and professional development of practitioners and provides oversight of levels three and four of PIP. It encourages research into homicide and major incident investigation and fosters good working relations between practitioners, policy makers and academics in this field. Membership of the HWG is drawn widely from the Police Service and partner agencies. It comprises the following:

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Investigating missing persons: learning from interviews with families

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Abstract

Based on novel research with families of missing persons, this article outlines important insights into the needs of families and the search related opportunities they present for targeted police investigative and search activities. The importance of empathetic and clear communication and liaison pathways between police and families are discussed along with good practice for police-family partnership working. The consequences of breakdowns in communications are also highlighted.

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1. Introduction

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

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

The words cited above, both from mothers of adult missing persons, give a sense of the profound rupture that having a missing family member creates. Echoing this, families of missing people are often understood to experience a particular space of ambiguity, captured in the phrase 'living in limbo' (Holmes 2008). Despite these strong emotional issues, only a very small literature 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). Furthermore, no research has specifically considered the different ways in which families mobilize their own resources to search for missing people and how this might compliment or conflict with police search activity. In this article we cover the key learning from interviews with relatives of those who have gone missing. We offer important insights into the needs of families, and the search related opportunities they present, and how this may have relevance for targeted police investigative and search activities.

2. Research methodology

Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and with the support of Police Scotland and the Metropolitan Police Service, we conducted 21 interviews and 1 focus group with family members of returned missing people. Family members had experience of missing events that ranged from a few hours to a few weeks to 20 years. In terms of outcomes; 48% of the interviews related to a family member who had been located, 44% related to a family member who was still missing and in 2 interviews the missing person was found dead. Full details of the methodology for the research can be found in Parr and Stevenson (2013). Recruitment was challenging and while we make no attempt to claim that the findings of these interviews are representative of all families of missing people, the interviews

provide new and important insights offering value to police understanding, policy and practice in this field. In the following sections we use qualitative evidence, taken directly from the interviews, to illustrate key themes.

3. Families as active search agents

The majority of family members undertook some kind of search activity prior to, during and post police involvement in the missing case. As can be seen from Table 1, these search type activities varied and can be categorised as; physical search, virtual and documentary search, social networks search, and charitable search. Significant and extensive, they range from anticipated kinds of searching such as phone work (phoning the missing person and all their social contacts), to: doing physical searches, engaging the local community, contacting local shops and cafes, hospital, churches, homeless shelters; and particular people in the community like drug dealers, homeless people, charity and specialist workers. There is also prolific letter writing and media related activity. Importantly, this family search activity occurs both with and without police knowledge. Even once the police are formally involved surprising amounts of search activity continue to occur. This is reported as rarely being done as partnership work, but mostly occurs either as a negative response to a *lack of knowledge* of police search or *dissatisfaction* with it *as well as* a form of active emotional management - the understandable need to be doing something.

Family Search Activity

Physical

- Searching personal belongings and accommodation
- Site-specific search on foot and in car
- Door knocking in local area
- Designing maps and search teams (initial period)
- Visits to homeless shelters and rough sleeping spaces
- Visiting cafes, pubs and supermarkets
- Computer search
- Interviewing and visiting local specialists/significant actors (e.g. shop-workers, landowners, drug dealers, search and rescue services, retired police officers)
- Replicating/re-enacting journeys

Virtual/documentary

- Ringing mobile phone
- Social media appeals and pages
- Posters individually designed and with Charity Missing People
- Media appeals (TV news and documentaries, Radio, Print)
- Letters to all UK Health boards
- 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
- Contacting specialist services for specialist maps (e.g. RAF)
- Contacting specialist services (eg VOSA, Search and Rescue services)
- Obtaining technical reports on tides and currents
- Contacting local MP
- Contacting Embassies and the British High Commission
- Letters to French Foreign Legion
- 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
- Research on private search and rescue and detection
- Research on private dive teams

Social Networks/alerts

- Visits and calls to all family and friends and address book contacts

Other/charitable help

- Missing People Charity
- Salvation Army
- Paying for character statements from psychiatrists, significant professional others

Other practices

- 'Looking' but not searching

Table 1: Family Search Activity (reproduced from Parr and Stevenson, 2013 p 54)

4. Communication between families and police

Many interviewees reported good or varied communication with police officers. This was predominantly associated with professional but empathetic officers who appear genuinely invested in the case and follow up regularly with the family. In some cases, this was found to impact on a family's decision not to engage in their own search activities:

> "They were very, very quick at getting searches up and running so there was no need for us to do anything like that'

Families also report that a sense of investment by officers, receiving clear statements on responsibilities and working in partnership were particularly helpful:

> '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 onto, that could be them and what would they want done?'

Where communication was not so effective, or there were non-systematic communication pathways or poor standards of communication, relationships between the police and families were comprised. For example, families were sometimes left with the impression that there was little co-ordination between police officers (whether or not this was actually the case):

> '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.'

> "He was very much a case of 'you'll not hear from me unless I've got something.' That was hard. That was really quite difficult."

Linked to this, families often reported not being fully informed of what was happening and having to chase various police officers for news:

'*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 and who do we speak to next and what do we do now and what have you done and are you doing any more and where do we go from here, why should that be us? 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.*'

The key benefit of police-family communication lay in families understanding police search decision making and parameters of the police search. However, this was often *not* understood or misunderstood and resulted in some families assuming that police officers are not trained in missing person enquiries.

5. Family search as a response to poor police communication

It was clear that families are not passive when they are dissatisfied with what they know of the police searches being conducted. They actively respond to their dissatisfaction, sometimes launching their own search strategies that can last for years. At the extreme, where families lost complete trust in police abilities to search, communications and cooperation broke down completely.

Table 2 shows the police and family search activity undertaken in a particular case where communication flow and family liaison was poor from a family perspective. In this case the family questioned the professional standards of the search work undertaken by the police and chose to undertake their own search activity to compensate. This had detrimental costs to force reputation and, equally, the emotional recovery of those left behind but still searching.

Police Search Activity	Family Search activity
• Search Team, Dog Team, Helicopter, Underwater Search Team, British Transport Police, Search and Rescue volunteers • Text message to be vigilant to wardens, county council wardens, farmers, game keepers, equine establishments, rural business • Media appeals • Posters circulated to all local beauty spots • Door-to-door leaflet drops in the areas surroundings vehicle • Finger tip searches in the areas surrounding vehicle • House search and local environs • Search of local garages, wasteland, parks • Interviews with: family members, friends, associates, local ramblers associations, quarry and brick work owners • Documentary evidence: diaries & letter • Computer search	• Searched area round the vehicle and woods • Internet search: (behavioural profiles, search protocols, bone scavenging) • Poster campaign: artefacts, missing person profile • Interviewing: local people, walking associations, park rangers, quarry and brick works owners, search and rescue operatives • Media appeals • Computer search Searches requested of police: • Interviews with ramblers and walking associations; quarry and brick works owners • Poster campaigns • Media appeals for artefacts not profile

Table 2: Case Study: Police vs. Family Search Activity (reproduced from Stevenson and Woolnough (forthcoming).

6. Character witnessing and police relations

What many families report as a critical point of their role in missing person enquiries is their own *character witness* of the person who is missing. Although family character witnessing may be complicated by friends, work place and acquaintance testimony, families reported the need to feel that their witness statement has been appropriately taken on board by investigating officers. It is, therefore, critical that this witnessing is well recorded, shared appropriately and actively used by police officers. Families understood that the stronger the picture of

their missing member that can be developed at the start, the more likely it is they will be traced or located. However, this was one of the *most* reported stress points in family-police relationships. The need for family members to repeat their character witness multiple times to multiple officers increased the perception for families that their witness statements were not being properly handled or taken note of. While there may be good investigative reasons to check and recheck statements with different officers initially, when this continues over a period of months and years, families perceive this negatively.

Importantly, families do report positive evidence about investigating officers using the right sort of spatial questions that prompt families to think in detail and think laterally about the 'where?' of their missing family member:

> *'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 [they, the police] start prompting. Things like "where would she normally go shopping, would it be unusual for her to go anywhere else?" It was about routines and things like that.'*

However, some families found they had difficulty impressing upon officers something about the unusual nature of the disappearance and particular character of the missing person:

> *'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."*

In the case associated with the quote above, the parents spoke about a varied relationship with the police where 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 they felt were inappropriate, unclear and repetitive. Consequently, they felt strongly that their character witness was not being well recorded or well regarded. Late one Sunday night, after a year, the police called to say they had closed the case as they believed the individual to be a *"perfectly competent adult and who has gone missing of his own accord"*. While the police may well have had good reason for the case closure, the family report not being involved in the decision and feeling in limbo as a result of this. As part of trying to live their lives actively, the family reported continuing their own search.

Of critical importance here is the duty of care to the family in terms of communication standards which can prevent suffering and uncertainty years after missing events. This is particularly related to communication about *how and why* certain types of police search have or have not taken place and being sure families feel their evidence matters and is well recorded.

7. Good practice

Officers have a role in reducing experiences of trauma in missing situations by promoting police-family partnership work. Good partnership work is also likely to reduce officer resource allocation required to deal with constant family enquiries and their search efforts. Good practice in partnership work which families reported specifically related to:

- Police officers agreeing regular call times for news sharing (i.e., proactively rather than reactively)
- Notifying families when officers change on the case and introducing new officers with good hand-over
- Police officers calling every few months in long term cases
- Promoting local force 'investment' in locating the missing person
- Referring families to the Missing People charity
- Police officers sharing search tasks with families in partnership (e.g. police giving families 'letter writing' tasks to a range of other agencies like churches or

homeless hostels across the country)

The best experiences of partnership working are when there are clear and sole named officers for communication and updates. This was particularly illustrated in the cases which involved the deployment of Family Liaison Officers. The potential for Police Search Advisors to help deliver much needed technical information to families should also be considered.

Finally, families can and should be seen as 'reasonable' active partners and can be well regarded as such in investigations, as illustrated by this final quote from the mother of a missing son:

> **"**I think to put all of this into some sort of positive advice to the police, would be to say to them don't assume that the partners or parents or spouses of people that go missing are incapable of guiding your inquiries. Don't reach conclusions that you don't discuss with those people. The disappearance of a loved one is emotionally shocking, but it also focuses the mind very greatly, and that weight should be given to suggestions and recommendations that members of the family make".

8. Conclusions

The research presented here highlights key components of police-family relations during missing person investigations and provides practical insights for those with responsibility for and to the families of missing persons. Of central importance is the provision of empathetic and clear communication and liaison pathways between police and families. Police officers have a duty of care to the family in terms of communication standards which can prevent suffering and uncertainty years after missing events - this is particularly related to communication about *how and why* certain types of police search have or have not taken place and being sure families feel their evidence matters and is well recorded. Officers also have a role in reducing experiences of trauma in missing situations by promoting police-family partnership work and recognising families as 'reasonable' active partners. This not only helps with emotional management tactics for family members but can add real value to investigations. While these findings have implications for police response

to missing persons, they also suggest that developing an awareness and culture of talk around missing experiences could be helpful to those at risk of going absent, their families, police and other agencies (Stevenson et al., 2013).

The findings of the family research reported here have led to direct changes in relation to family liaison and partnership working as set out in the UK Authorised Professional Practice (published by the College of Policing) and the Police Scotland Missing Persons Standard Operating Procedure. For full information on this and other aspects of the project visit the project website: *www.geographiesofmissingpeople.org.uk*. Free resources available for local training and continuous professional development include 10 'stories of missing experience' called *Missing People, Missing Voices*: composite accounts of the verbatim narratives of the missing people interviewed.

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