

Missing in lockdown – new report reveals the vulnerable are more at risk

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The number of people who went missing during the first national lockdown in England fell by over a third, compared to data from the previous year. However, a new report out today shows that those who did go missing were deemed more vulnerable and at higher risk.

Researchers from the University of Liverpool and University of Portsmouth worked with six [police forces](#) from across the UK, to understand the impact of [lockdown](#) on missing people and recommend changes for the future.

Missing people are one of the most challenging issues for modern police forces, with the number of reported cases reaching 382,960 in 2018/2019 (NCA, 2020). The recent pandemic, and the resultant national as well as localised lockdowns, have placed unique demands on the emergency services (WHO, 2020).

The study aimed to compare the characteristics of missing people cases reported to participating forces during the period of the COVID-19 lockdown in England, with sample of cases taken from the same time period last year. The sample comprised of reports of adults and children who went missing between 23rd March 2020 until 20th May 2020, and the same time period in 2019.

As expected, the lockdown period led to a substantial reduction in the overall number of missing persons. There was a 35% decrease in missing children reports and 36% reduction in reports of missing adults.

However, the research also highlighted that those who went missing were more likely to be high risk of harming themselves or others. Adults who went missing during this period were more prone to mental health issues; domestic abuse; have relationship, drug or alcohol problems; or have a history of self-harm or suicidal thoughts.

Dr. Karen Shalev Greene, reader in criminology, director of the Centre for the Study of Missing Persons, University of Portsmouth explains: "The reduction in missing people is entirely expected, it is much harder to go missing, when the country is locked down. However, what is significant about these figures is it highlights how desperate some people must have been."

"The report emphasises the vulnerability of people that go missing during lockdown. Perhaps they live in situations that impact their mental health more making them determined for freedom. Whatever the reason, this is a reflection of society as a whole, including criminal organisations, exploitation, vulnerability and those that need support. To help prevent high risk missing adults from going missing the response needs to be multi agency. Efforts should also focus on after care and support once they return."

The report also highlighted that children were more likely to be classified as low risk during lockdown. The reason for this needs further investigation and understanding.

Dr. Freya O'Brien, senior lecturer in psychology, University of Liverpool, explains: "Particular attention should be given to understanding the reasons why children from care homes frequently went missing during lockdown and why children travelled long distances. One theory is that children in care were trying to get home to their families. It is important to bear regional differences in mind. Each force should study the patterns of missing in their force and consider local

context."

National Police Chiefs' Council Lead for Missing People, Assistant Chief Constable Catherine Hankinson, said: "This research helps us to understand the changing trends in missing people and the different reasons they went missing during the first lockdown. The trend in more incidents being categorised as high risk suggests some of us really struggled with being isolated from our normal support networks. Police and our partners in health, social care and local authorities need to learn from that experience and consider how we can support people, particularly those with [mental health issues](#), through ongoing restrictions.

"The research found that missing children were more likely to be categorised as low risk which is partly because some of them were reported missing for breaking the lockdown rules but then often returned safe and well after a short time. However, we will closely consider the research in the context of child exploitation, county lines and organised crime. Police are already aware of how these criminals are changing the way they operate but there is always more to do and we're committed to tackling those who are intent on causing harm to our communities and young people.

"Our work with partners in [local authorities](#) and social services will consider how we maintain contact with vulnerable [children](#) during any further restrictions, as it is vital we all do everything possible to protect them from abuse and exploitation at home."

Dr. Susan Giles, a lecturer in psychology at the University of Liverpool was also a co-author of the report.

Provided by University of Liverpool

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