

Lockdown 3: Stricter rules could lead to more vulnerable people going missing

January 21 2021, by Freya O'brien, Craig Collie and Susan Giles



Credit: Kindel Media from Pexels

In non-pandemic times, a person [goes missing](#) every 90 seconds in the

UK, either intentionally, accidentally or because they are forced to. While many missing people are found quickly or return voluntarily, some do come to [emotional, physical and sexual harm, including self-harm](#).

It is crucial that we try to understand the impact that current lockdowns across the UK will have on the rates and types of people who go missing to try to prevent trauma, injury and death.

[Figures](#) from the first UK [lockdown](#) suggest a decrease in missing people reports to the police. In a [report](#) (which is presently under peer review for an academic journal), we compare missing person reports in the first UK lockdown with the same [time period](#) in 2019 and predict there will be an increase in particular groups of people who go missing in the current lockdown.

Instructions to stay at home and socially distance will have inevitably had an impact on [well-being](#), leaving many feeling [lonely](#) and [fearful](#). Some people will find it difficult to cope, especially in light of stressful life events such as losing a loved one to COVID-19 or [financial hardship](#).

Therefore, we expect more people to go missing as a response to [mental health issues](#), in order to have time to [think or escape](#). This may be exacerbated by normally available resources becoming overburdened and difficult to access.

Based on recent research from April 2020, in response to the first lockdown, we anticipate an increase in [suicide rates](#) this lockdown. Some people may also go missing in order to [take their own life](#).

Studies have shown that being locked down with our households as well as the absence of face-to-face contact with professionals may expose more people to [family conflict and domestic violence](#), especially

[children](#). Victims of such abuse may need to escape in order to flee such adverse circumstances.

It's likely too that there will be a rise in children going missing from residential care so as to be locked down in familiar surroundings [with family and friends](#), or perhaps because they are [being drawn away by exploiters](#).

An increase in particularly vulnerable people going missing will have an inevitable impact on policing and search-and-rescue teams. If greater numbers of those classed as being at high risk of coming to harm go missing, it could lead to an increase in the [demand on resources](#). This will be compounded by existing difficulties in relying on the public or friends and family to look out for or search for a missing person due to restrictions on movement.

Will rates drop again?

Based on directives to stay at home or "triggers" to going missing ([such as being bullied at school](#)) not being present, we anticipate that [police reports](#) will be lower compared with this time last year. Despite the likelihood of certain groups being more vulnerable to going missing, the police data may not give us the whole picture. The public may be reluctant to report their loved ones missing through fear of fines or criminalisation for breaking lockdown rules

Clear messaging

With increased coverage of the enforcement of stricter COVID-19 lockdown rules, it is crucial that the police and government clarify whether any sanctions will apply to those who are reported missing.

Messaging in this lockdown is harder than before—police statements reported in the media indicate that few "reasonable excuses" for lockdown breaches [will be accepted](#).

Speaking to Sky News on January 10, the UK health secretary, Matt Hancock, [explicitly stated](#) that "every flexibility could be fatal" indicating that exceptions and discretion would be very limited and that fines would be applied when possible. Indeed, [media coverage of sanctions for breaking restrictions](#) is widespread.

If people are going missing as a result of crises and stress it is imperative that messaging be clarified as to what is and is not a "reasonable excuse" during the third lockdown—and beyond.

It is clear that those at risk of going missing need the support of those around them (albeit socially distanced) as well as from appropriate services. There have been considerable efforts to support and [increase funding to agencies](#) in order to connect with at-risk individuals [remotely](#). But there may be less infrastructure in place to identify those people not already "in the system" who become at risk during or as a result of the pandemic.

The charity Missing People has [warned](#) that the pandemic will, over time, mean that more people will go missing. It also suggests that disadvantaged communities, minority groups, and already [vulnerable people](#) will more severely affected. We echo their call for greater access to support for those at risk of going missing, as well as their family and friends—and for those who return.

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