



A Safer Return

An analysis of the value of return home interviews in identifying risk and ensuring returning missing children are supported

**missing
people**

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June 2019

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1. Executive Summary

Background

Children and young people who go missing are at significant risk of harm. They face risks not only while away from home or care but also from problems that contributed to them going missing, including child sexual exploitation (CSE),¹ child criminal exploitation (CCE),² mental health issues and problems at school or home.³

Return Home Interviews (RHIs) offer a key opportunity to safeguard and support young people on their return from missing. However their effectiveness and value as an intervention at this crucial point is not well understood.⁴

This report presents an analysis of information provided in RHIs by over 200 children following nearly 600 missing incidents.⁵ It focuses on incidents judged to be low or medium risk by the police⁶ and explores how risks identified through RHIs varied from this initial risk assessment.

Findings

A Safer Return shows that serious harm and ongoing risks are not confined to the minority identified as high risk, but are regularly disclosed by young people assessed to be at medium or low risk by the police while missing.

The analysis presented in this report demonstrates that RHIs can be an important tool in identifying ongoing risks and harm that have already been experienced; that they provide an opportunity for getting help to children at a point when they might need it most; and that they can help to inform

¹ Berelowitz, S., Firmin, C., Edwards, G. and Gulyurtlu, S. *'I thought I was the only one. The only one in the world'.* The Office of the Children's Commissioner's Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Gangs and Groups, 2012.

² Sturrock, R. and Holmes, L. *Running the Risks: The links between gang involvement and young people going missing*, 2015.

³ Rees, G. and Lee, J. *Still Running 2*, The Children's Society, 2005.

⁴ Department for Education, *Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care*, 2014. Return Home Interviews were introduced to "provide an opportunity to uncover information that can help protect children from the risk of going missing again, from risks they may have been exposed to while missing or from risk factors in their home."

⁵ Throughout the report reference is made to missing incidents or episodes as well as missing children or individuals. The former relate to the number of occasions that a child is reported missing, so children who were reported missing more than once over the period will have more than one missing incident or episode in the figures. The latter is the total number of children included in the analysis. Analysis at child-level is based on the total number of individual children, so each child is counted only once.

⁶ This analysis examines missing incidents judged to be medium or low risk by the police in their initial risk assessment. As explained later in this report, high risk incidents were excluded from the overall analysis due to the aims of the research.

police investigations and wider safeguarding efforts to reduce future risk of harm to the interviewed child and, in some instances, other children or wider community.

A Safer Return shows that, based on information subsequently disclosed in RHIs, for missing episodes classified as low or medium risk by the police:

- **One in seven (14%) children were either currently victims of sexual exploitation or had been in the past. More than two in five (43%) children shared information relating to one or more of five indicators that might be considered a 'red flag' for CSE.⁷**
- **One in twelve (8%) children were either a current or past victim of criminal or another form of child exploitation.**

High numbers of children who went missing in medium or low risk incidents presented with mental health issues:

- One in five (21%) children shared information which suggested they had depression or another mental health issue:
 - Around one in eight (13%) presented at risk of self-harm.
 - 4% disclosed information suggesting they were at risk of suicide.

A Safer Return also identifies a range of other risk factors and support needs among these children:

- **Over half (51%) had issues with truancy, poor school attendance or exclusion from school.**
- Two in five (40%) shared information relating to substance misuse and three in ten (30%) about alcohol misuse.
- **More than two in five (42%) were identified as having low self-esteem or poor self-confidence.**

A Safer Return has identified that looked after children who had been reported missing in a medium or low risk incident were particularly vulnerable to exploitation and other harm:

- **Close to two in five (39%) of all children who went missing from the research area went missing from care.⁸**

⁷ The five indicators deemed to be a 'red flag' for CSE were gang association; gifts from undisclosed sources; sexually exploited friends; recruiting others for exploitation; and an associating with older people or an older boyfriend/girlfriend.

⁸ This percentage is based on all children reported missing in the case study areas as recorded on the police missing persons case management system, including children assessed to be high risk in the police investigation. However it excludes young people from that local authority area who had been placed out of area whose missing episodes are not held on this system.

- 19% of looked after children who went missing in an incident assessed to be medium or low risk were currently a victim of, or had experienced CSE in the past.
- 13% of looked after children were currently a victim of, or had experienced child criminal or another form of exploitation.
- 35% of looked after children shared information about alcohol misuse.

The value of RHIs, including as a tool for early intervention work, was clear in the research. Children disclosed information which allowed professionals to take appropriate action before further escalation of any risk the child was facing:

- Close to one in five (18%) of the children were either offered or provided regular 1-to-1 support by Missing People following their RHI for a medium or low risk incident, and a further 12% agreed to be contacted in a single follow up call or visit.
- For nine in ten (90%) medium and low risk missing episodes addressed in an RHI, the child consented for all information disclosed to be shared with children's services and the police. This valuable information can be used to develop a safety plan for that young person, as well as providing crucial information and intelligence for professionals, including the police.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: all children should continue to be offered RHIs, regardless of police risk assessment level.

RHIs are an essential tool for identifying the reasons why a young person has gone missing, including identification of risk of CSE, child criminal exploitation ('CCE'), problems at school or home, and many other types of harm. The level and range of risks disclosed by children whose missing episode had been assessed as low or medium risk by the police show that it is essential the offer of a RHI remains open to all who go missing, not just those who are assessed to be high risk in the police investigation.

Recommendation 2: RHIs should be used as an opportunity for early identification of risks to address a range of different harms associated with missing.

RHIs are one of very few professional safeguarding interventions which are not reliant on the child meeting specific thresholds for a particular 'type' of risk; thresholds which are growing increasingly

high in many cases. A key strength of RHIs is that they can provide a universal service through which variety of risks faced by children and young can be identified in just one intervention.

Recommendation 3: All RHI services should include the opportunity for follow up support.

Although this report makes it clear that RHIs are a valuable service for identifying harm and providing an initial intervention for vulnerable children, a one-off conversation is not enough to be considered as effective support for children who have experienced trauma, have complex needs or are at ongoing risk. It is therefore important that there is the opportunity for follow-up support within the RHI service; this can allow children to build trust and to get ongoing help without needing to 'qualify' for a specialist service.

Recommendation 4: Findings from RHIs should be effectively shared, recorded and included in safety planning.

The findings in this report clearly show that valuable information can be gathered during an RHI, including in some instances information that hasn't previously been disclosed to or is not known by professionals. This information can be vital to the future safeguarding of that child and potentially other children, for example those at risk from the same perpetrators of exploitation. RHIs need to be a confidential safe space for children to talk about their missing episode, but if serious disclosures made during an RHI are not shared, recorded and taken into account when professionals are supporting that child, this is a failure in effective safeguarding. It also undermines the child's trust as their voice and concerns have not been listened to and acted upon.

Recommendation 5: The Department for Education and Ofsted should provide more robust oversight to ensure that statutory guidance is adhered to.

Statutory guidance requires an RHI to be offered to all children when they return from missing. However, the guidance available on what good looks like in relation to RHIs is relatively limited and, although Ofsted include performance in delivering RHIs in their inspections, there is still too little national oversight to ensure that a good quality service is being delivered in all areas. Increased oversight from the Department for Education and Ofsted, including refreshed guidance on delivery and how information is recorded, would not only ensure that all local authorities are offering good quality RHIs to every child when they return from missing. It would also allow for a better understanding of the national picture, both in terms of delivery, and the issues and risks being identified within the RHIs themselves.

2. Background

Missing children



Annually in the UK, an estimated 80,000 children go missing in over 210,000 reported incidents.⁹ Missing children are at significant risk of harm, although it is hard to quantify what proportion come to harm while missing. Research by the Children’s Society found that 11% of missing children had been “hurt or harmed while away from home on the only or most recent occasion”.¹⁰ Other research has found that one in every eight young people reported missing had been physically hurt and one in nine had been sexually assaulted while away.¹¹

Even if a child does not come to direct harm while missing, they can nevertheless be at substantially increased risk. Research has shown they are more likely to have to resort to unsafe strategies whilst away; 18% admitted to sleeping rough or staying with someone they just met,¹² and one in five to stealing, begging or doing “other things” in order to survive.¹³ Missing children are also at greater risk of being exploited, with seven in ten victims of CSE also going missing from home at least once.¹⁴

Children who go missing repeatedly have been found to be at particular risk: “young people who had run away more than once were much more likely to have been harmed or had a risky experience while away.”¹⁵ There are strong links between repeat missing and exploitation. The Office of the Children’s Commissioner (OCC) Inquiry into child sexual exploitation (CSE) in gangs and groups points to evidence from 14 site visits showing that children who were being sexually exploited were also “repeatedly going missing, in some cases three or more times within a two-week period”.¹⁶

In addition to risk of harm while away, the missing episode itself is frequently a red flag for problems or risks in a child’s life: conflict at home, difficulties at school, mental health issues, and substance or alcohol misuse are all common triggers.¹⁷ These issues are likely to remain present on return and in some instances the missing episode may have exacerbated these difficulties. For example, while

⁹ <https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/about-us/about-the-issue/research/76-keyinformation2.html>

¹⁰ Rees, G. ‘Still Running 3: Early findings from our third national survey of young runaways,’ The Children’s Society, 2011.

¹¹ Biehal, N., Mitchell F., and Wade J. *Lost from View*, 2003

¹² The Children’s Society, *Still Running 3*, 2011.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Berelowitz, S., Firmin, C., Edwards, G. and Gulyurtlu, S. ‘I thought I was the only one. The only one in the world’. *The Office of the Children’s Commissioner’s Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Gangs and Groups*, 2012.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Home Office, *Missing Children and Adults: A Cross Government Strategy*, 2011.

mental health issues are known to be a common trigger for children's missing episodes, going missing has also been shown to have a detrimental impact on children's mental health.¹⁸

Police Risk Assessments

When a child is reported missing the police will complete a risk assessment process. Police judge whether a missing incident is high, medium or low risk, or of no apparent risk, based on the perceived likelihood of harm to the missing child or the public. Risk of serious harm is defined as *"a risk which is life threatening and/or traumatic, and from which recovery, whether physical or psychological, can be expected to be difficult or impossible"*.¹⁹

Nationally, the majority of all missing incidents are deemed to be medium risk (76.8%) with around one in eight (12.5%) being judged high risk and one in ten (10.7%) low risk.²⁰ The risk assessment level impacts on the approach and level of resource allocated to the missing person investigation:

Risk Level	Risk assessment	Required response
High	The risk of serious harm to the subject or the public is assessed as very likely.	Almost always requires the immediate deployment of police resources. A member of the senior management team must be involved in the examination of initial lines of enquiry and approval of appropriate staffing levels. Such cases should lead to the appointment of an Investigating Officer (IO) and possibly a Senior Investigating Officer (SIO), and a police search adviser (PoSA). Children's services must also be notified immediately if the person is under 18.
Medium	The risk of harm to the subject or the public is assessed as likely but not serious.	Requires an active and measured response by the police and other agencies in order to trace the missing person and support the person reporting.
Low	The risk of harm to the subject or the public is assessed as possible but minimal.	Proportionate enquiries should be carried out to ensure that the individual has not come to harm.
No apparent risk (absent)	There is no apparent risk of harm to either the subject or the public.	Actions to locate the subject and/or gather further information should be agreed with the informant and a latest review time set to reassess the risk.

¹⁸ Home Office, *Missing Children and Adults: A Cross Government Strategy*, 2011.

¹⁹ Offender Assessment and Sentence Management - OASys Manual, chapter 8, 2006.

²⁰ National Crime Agency, *Missing Persons Data Report 2015-16*, 2017. Unfortunately these figures are not broken down by age so it is not possible to see the proportion of incidents assigned each risk level for under 18s only.

The police risk assessment may include information from a number of sources including the person who reported the child missing, parents or carers, previous missing incident reports and force intelligence databases. In some instances, particularly if the child is in the care of the local authority, children's services or other agencies involved with the child are included in the risk assessment process. They can share intelligence they have relating to that child with the police, for example concerns that the child is at risk of exploitation or is experiencing poor mental health.

In practice, police risk assessments may often be based on partial evidence, either because risks faced by a particular child are not yet known by any professionals or because agencies involved with that child have not shared all relevant intelligence with the police. Research suggests there is significant variation between different police forces in terms of what and how information is shared with them by other agencies. A recent study, for example, found that two-thirds of police forces do not have access to information from local authorities at the time of their initial risk assessment.²¹

The police risk assessment, while a vital tool in missing person investigations, is not always an appropriate indicator of a child's risk level or type of need on return. It is necessarily focused on the particular missing incident rather than the child's overall safeguarding level. It will also not be able to assess the likelihood of them going missing again.

A child may be judged to be low or medium risk by the police in the context of their investigation, only to be found in need of significant support on their return; something which happens frequently in Missing People's experience of supporting recently returned children. Equally, a child who regularly goes missing for short periods may be assessed to be medium or even low risk if they have a history of going missing in this way, but may actually be at significant ongoing risk of exploitation or other harm, particularly given that research suggests this type of repeat missing can be an indicator of exploitation.

²¹ Chetwynd, H. and Pona, I. *Making Connections*, The Children's Society, 2017.



Return Home Interviews

RHIs “provide an opportunity to uncover information that can help protect children from the risk of going missing again, from risks they may have been exposed to while missing or from risk factors in their home”

Department for Education, 2014

RHIs take place shortly after a child returns from missing and offer the opportunity to assess risk based on the child’s own account of what caused them to run away, what happened while they were missing and their current situation. They are the responsibility of the local authority, although there is significant variation in terms of their delivery.

Statutory guidance states that all missing children in England should be offered an RHI on their return.²² They were introduced as a way to identify the different sources of harm or risk of harm missing children are exposed to and ensure these risks are dealt with and reduced in the future. RHIs are an opportunity to discuss the reasons why the child went missing, understand what happened to them while away, and provide them with strategies to stay safe. Crucially they are an opportunity to safeguard children who have just returned from being missing.

Statutory guidance states that “the interview should be carried out within 72 hours of the child returning to their home or care setting”²³ and inspections regularly focus on this requirement.²⁴ The

²² Department for Education, *Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care*, 2014

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ While timeliness and urgency is important, there has been little evidence that 72 hours is the right amount of time. There are concerns amongst providers that by focusing on this the quality and overall impact of the RHI can be overlooked,

statutory guidance further states that return interviews should be carried out “by an independent person (i.e., someone not involved in caring for the child) who is trained to carry out these interviews and is able to follow-up any actions that emerge”.²⁵

RHIs represent a crucial opportunity for intervention and safeguarding of children. However, there has been limited research to determine whether they are effective in their current form and if they are meeting their stated aims of effectively supporting and safeguarding children who have been missing.

Previous research has found that RHIs combined with follow up support work can help to prevent future missing episodes and contribute to a range of positive outcomes and that every £1 invested in an RHI service achieved a social value of between £3 and £7.²⁶ Ofsted inspections have also suggested that RHIs with follow up support can help to reduce missing episodes: in Worcestershire the service “contributed to the 30% reduction in missing children incidents” over a year period.²⁷

However, for both of these reports it is not clear the extent to which the change was due to the RHI, the ongoing support, or a combination of both. The provision of RHIs only is a statutory duty, with no obligation on local authorities to provide follow up or ongoing support as part of this service.

Research also suggests that, despite the existing statutory duty in England and Wales, RHIs are not always being offered to every child or for every missing episode,²⁸ meaning that a valuable opportunity for intervention may be missed.²⁹

despite those factors being more important to the child’s experience and opportunities for safeguarding.
<https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/about-us/about-the-issue/policy-parliamentary-work/175-english-coalition-for-runaway-children/1033-rhi-good-practice.html>

²⁵ Department for Education, *Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care*, 2014.

²⁶ Railway Children, *The value of Return Home Interviews and follow-up support*, 2015.

²⁷ Ofsted, *Missing Children*, 2013.

²⁸ Chetwynd, H. and Pona, I. *Making Connections*, The Children’s Society, 2017. / The English Coalition for Runaway Children, *Return Home Interviews good practice*, 2017

²⁹ Pona, I., Raws, P. and Chetwynd, H. *The First Step: How return home interviews can improve support and safeguarding for missing young people*, The Children’s Society, 2019.

3. Research aims and methodology

Aims of the research

This report seeks to contribute evidence on the efficacy of RHIs by:

- Exploring the value of RHIs, both for the children who have gone missing and the agencies involved in supporting and safeguarding them.
- Increasing understanding about the harm or risk of harm missing children are exposed to both while away and in their wider lives.
- Increasing understanding about the role of RHIs in identifying and addressing these risks, including the gathering of information and intelligence not already known to the police and other services.

The research focuses on RHIs completed with children whose missing episodes were assessed by the police as being low or medium risk. It does this in order to assess the level of safeguarding and support needs of children who are judged to require a less intensive response, but also to consider the effectiveness of RHIs in identifying these needs and in beginning the process of addressing them.

Methodology

Medium & low risk episodes:

Number of **children** included in analysis: 214

Number of **missing episodes** included in analysis: 585

The analysis is based on information collected through RHIs completed by Missing People in three local authority areas between 1st July 2017 and 31st March 2018. During this period, more than nine in ten (93%) of all missing child incidents in these areas were assessed to be medium risk by the police; a further 4% were categorised as low risk and the remaining 3% as high risk.

Staff completed an independent RHI with young people in response to 600 episodes, the vast majority (n585) of which related to medium and low risk missing incidents. These RHIs frequently addressed multiple missing episodes and three in ten children (31%) took part in more than one RHI, so these 585 episodes involved 214 children. The profile of these children is broadly in line with the

wider missing population in the three local authority areas, including in relation to risk levels, gender and age.³⁰

Profile of those completing an RHI		
	N	%³¹
Looked after children	80	37%
Children who are open to children's services, including those with a Child Protection Plan (CP), Child in Need plan (CiN) and those being supported by Early Help services (EH)	88	41%
Children who are not known or open to any services	55	26%

The analysis in this report focuses on these 214 children whose missing incident was judged to be medium or low risk by the police. The aim of this approach is to better understand the type and level of risk faced by these children and explore how risks identified through RHIs varied from the initial assessment of risk made by the police.³²

High risk missing episodes are much rarer and receive a much more resource-intensive response, often because a child is already known to be extremely vulnerable or in significant danger. Given the level of resource involved, they will always represent a minority of all missing incidents. These incidents have been excluded from the main analysis, although some information on high risk episodes has been included in Appendix B for comparison purposes.

A number of case studies have been included in the report. All names and ages have been changed as well as other identifying details. Wherever possible, case studies are composites of accounts from more than one child, to further anonymise the accounts.

³⁰ No RHIs were completed with children younger than 10 years old as these were provided directly by the local authority. As the 0-9 age group makes up less than 1% of all episodes, the lack of RHIs with this group does not have a significant impact on the overall age profile.

³¹ A small number of young people who completed more than one RHI are included in more than one of the three categories due to their legal status changing between RHIs. For this reason the total number of children is greater than 214 and the total percentage greater than 100%.

³² It is important to note that the risk assessment code used in this research was taken from the original missing notifications as the found notifications did not include a risk assessment level. Police risk assessment is dynamic and some of these risk levels may have changed during the course of the investigation, however the risk levels referred to in this report are based on the initial assessment only.

Limitations

This research was undertaken using internal Missing People data collected in the course of delivering RHIs over a nine month period in three local authority areas. It aims to contribute further information about the efficacy of RHIs, but there are a number of possible limitations to the data that it is important to note:

- **Geographical limitations:** The data analysed in this research was collected in three local authority areas. While there is no particular reason to expect these areas to be atypical, they are however geographically close to each other and may therefore have differences in patterns of missing to other parts of the country.
- **Single RHI service:** The RHIs were all conducted by Missing People using our model for an RHI service which may differ from RHIs provided elsewhere, particularly as statutory guidance is not particularly prescriptive about how RHIs should be conducted.
- **Purpose of data collection:** The information provided by children in the RHIs was collected and recorded for an operational purpose. These records provide a rich source of largely qualitative data, but it has not been possible to quantify some issues to the extent that might have been possible if the data had been collected specifically for research purposes.
- **Sample limitations:** Despite the offer being made, not all children agreed to take part in an RHI to discuss their missing episode, so although the profile of the children who completed an RHI seems broadly in line with the missing population as a whole, it is nevertheless possible that the data will be affected by this. The sample also excludes looked after children from the three local authorities who went missing while placed out of county, which will also have an impact on its representativeness.

4. Findings

Evidence of harm and risk of harm

Child sexual exploitation

There is a recognised link between children running away and exploitation, including child sexual and criminal exploitation, although this link is not fully understood.³³ The relationship is a complex one and works in both directions as *“children who go missing from home or education may be more vulnerable to exploitation, or they may go missing because they are being exploited.”*³⁴



Risk of harm from exploitation, including sexual exploitation (CSE), was a key theme to emerge from many of the RHIs.

Around **one in seven (14%)** of the 214 children who took part in a RHI for a medium or low risk episode were either currently victims of CSE at the time of their RHI or had been a victim in the past.

An even greater proportion was identified as at risk of CSE based on the information they provided in their RHI. More than **two in five (43%)** children shared information relating to one or more of five indicators that might be considered a ‘red flag’ for CSE:

- Nearly two in five (39%) children had an **older boyfriend or girlfriend** or were known to **associate with older people**.
- One in ten (10%) **had friends who had been sexually exploited**.
- 9% mentioned **receiving gifts from a source they wouldn’t identify**.
- 8% had some **association with gangs** in their neighbourhood.
- Two children disclosed information indicating they were **recruiting other children for exploitation**.

³³ A range of research studies have highlighted this relationship, including “Running from hate to what you think is love” (2013) in relation to Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE), and “Running the Risks” (2015) regarding criminal exploitation (CCE) of young people by gangs amongst others.

³⁴ Ofsted, *Time to listen’ a joined up response to child sexual exploitation and missing children*, 2016.

In some of these incidents, exploitative relationships seem to have been the main 'push factor' that contributed to the child going missing. For example, one in ten (10%) shared information which suggested they went missing because of CSE or were with a perpetrator of exploitation or unsafe adult while missing, and close to three in ten (29%) disclosed in their RHI they had been away in order to associate with older peers.



Case Study 1

Kate, aged 14, lived with her father and was not open to any services at the time of her RHI. She went missing from home for several days after failing to return from an evening spent at a school friend's house. On her return, Kate told the police that she had been staying with friends in a nearby town.

Kate disclosed in the RHI that she uses a number of drugs which she gets for free from older males in return for going with them to meet other people. Kate wouldn't disclose what she had to do with these men, but sexual activity was implied. When asked about her understanding of what it means to be criminally or sexually exploited, she said she felt she wasn't being exploited as she "chose" to do these things in return for drugs.

Safeguarding concerns about Kate were shared with the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub team and she was also provided with follow up support.

Child criminal and other exploitation

Around **one in twelve (8%)** of the 214 children interviewed in relation to a medium or low risk missing episode was **either currently a victim of criminal or other form of child exploitation or had been in the past**, with many more revealing factors which might make them vulnerable to such exploitation.

Existing research shows that criminal and sexual exploitation can go hand-in-hand.³⁵ This was also evident in this analysis, with a number of children disclosing information in their RHI which suggests they were vulnerable to a combination of criminal and sexual exploitation involving the same perpetrators. **More than two in five (44%)** of the children identified as either currently experiencing criminal exploitation or having been a victim of this in the past, had also been exploited sexually.

Case Study 2

Jade, aged 15, said she was in a relationship with an adult male in his twenties and associated with a number of other older men as well. She disclosed that she recently had sex with one of these other older males because she was scared to say no.

Jade regularly used cannabis but was unwilling to say how much she used, how she financed the drug, or where she got it from. Jade's mother believed she was being used by her boyfriend to set up drug deals and said that she often returned home with large quantities of money.

Jade agreed to a follow up visit a week later and the information she provided was shared with her social worker as well as the police and children's services.

Mental health

Mental health issues can be a trigger for some children to run away and in the most extreme cases children go missing with the intention of hurting themselves or to take their own life. The analysis showed that in the case study area:

- **One in five (21%)** children who went missing in a medium or low risk episode shared information which suggested they had depression or another mental health issue.
- Around **one in eight (13%)** presented as at risk of self-harm and **4%** of suicide.

³⁵ Sturrock, R. and Holmes, L. *Running the Risks: The links between gang involvement and young people going missing*, 2015.

For others, going missing was an attempt to escape from their mental health issues for a while, for example by spending time with friends, drinking alcohol or taking drugs, or as one child put it “*a distraction from the thoughts going around in my head*”.

One in four children (24%) who were not known to any services presented as at risk due to depression or another mental health issue at the time of their RHI. For at least some of these children, the RHI was their first interaction with a professional regarding their mental health and an opportunity to signpost or refer to CAMHS or other appropriate services.

Case Study 3

Noah, aged 14, was missing from home for several days. He had very little sleep during that time and said he was mainly walking around in a bid to avoid being found.

Noah, who has mental health issues, describes having daily suicidal thoughts and has attempted suicide several times.

Counselling and therapy were discussed as options for dealing with his mental health needs as he had counselling previously and found it helpful.

Following the RHI, safeguarding concerns about Noah were shared with his social worker and the area’s multi-agency group with oversight of missing young people and child exploitation.

Case Study 4

Sophie, aged 15, was reported missing by her foster carer after being missing overnight. She presented in a very low mood in the RHI; withdrawn and uncommunicative compared to her previous RHI.

Sophie said that she went missing because she was trying to distract herself from all of the issues going around in her head, which she felt unable to cope with. She had received support from her GP and CAMHS in the past, but said she often felt too anxious to attend appointments. She’d had periods of self-harming for a number of years.

Following the RHI, Sophie was supported in accessing help for her mental health issues.

Other Risk Indicators

In addition to child exploitation and mental health issues, the RHIs in the case study areas identified a range of other risk factors and support needs among the 214 children interviewed in relation to a medium or low risk episode.³⁶ In some instances these risks were direct triggers for the missing incident, while in others they were wider vulnerabilities identified in the course of discussions with children about their current situation including home life, school and peer relationships:

³⁶ It is likely that these figures are an underestimate of actual risk levels due to the way in which they are reported operationally.

- Half of children (51%) had issues with truancy, poor school attendance or exclusion from school.
- Two in five (40%) shared information relating to substance misuse and three in ten (30%) about alcohol misuse.
- More than two in five children (42%) were identified as having low self-esteem or poor self-confidence.
- One in five (21%) identified themselves as involved in offending in some way.³⁷
- One in five (20%) appeared to lack friends their own age.
- More than one in twenty (6%) presented with physical injuries at the time of the RHI.
- One in twenty children (5%) had witnessed domestic abuse.

Most children disclosed a range of risk factors, some interrelated and others independent of each other. By providing the opportunity for a child to talk about not only their missing episode but also their current situation in general, RHIs are able to provide a holistic service through which a variety of risks can be identified in a single intervention.



³⁷ Survival offending while missing and offending due to criminal exploitation were included within this category.

Additional value of RHIs in addressing risks

An RHI is an opportunity for professionals to discuss a missing episode in depth with a child, and equally importantly to explore their current situation more broadly; neither of which is usually achievable in the only other intervention they receive on their return, a police safe and well check.³⁸ For example, RHIs in the case study areas included a discussion with the child about their support networks and friendship groups, and in particular about any relationships with older people to see if any of these were potentially unhealthy or even exploitative. It was through these wider conversations that many of the disclosures about CSE emerged. The information about these risks were then shared with children's services and the police – with the child's consent or on occasion without it if safeguarding necessitated this³⁹ – to ensure that that child was appropriately safeguarded.

Many of the children who shared information about their missing episode in their RHI, including details suggesting they were at risk of exploitation, said they had not disclosed some or all of this information to the police in their safe and well check. Some children said they had intentionally withheld this, or even provided false information, because they either felt uncomfortable disclosing information to the police or because they had a negative view of the police in general. For these children, the ability to talk about their missing episode with an independent professional rather than a police officer seemed to be a key factor in their decision to disclose this additional information.

For others, their additional disclosures seemed to stem more from the depth and breadth of the RHI's scope and its broader assessment of need. This is particularly important given that a child's underlying needs might not always be a direct trigger of their missing episode but rather a symptom of it.

By encouraging greater disclosure from children who have been missing, RHIs are better able to identify which children are in need of support. RHIs are a particularly valuable intervention when there is little or no previous awareness amongst professionals of the young person's vulnerability. Children who were not known to children's services for example, who were unlikely to have talked with a professional in the past, were nevertheless shown to be at significant risk in the case study areas; for example **one in three (33%) were judged to be at risk of CSE** due to disclosures relating to

³⁸ Safe and Well checks are also now known as prevention interviews. Both are still widely used but the former term has been used in this report to avoid confusion between these and RHIs.

³⁹ It was deemed necessary to breach confidentiality in order to share information with the police or children's services in 3% of episodes.

one or more 'red flag' risk factors. In these instances in particular, the RHI plays a pivotal role in identifying risk that might not otherwise have been detected.

An RHI also offers an opportunity to identify what *type* of support may be required by a child on their return, whether that is a referral to CAMHS for a child with mental health issues or a safeguarding action to protect a child who has revealed they are experiencing exploitation. Details of disclosures made in an RHI can then be shared with relevant agencies as a first step in ensuring that child is accessing appropriate support services.

Finally, RHIs can provide the emotional support young people need to reflect on their experiences and, with this support, to make safer choices in the future. For example, many children who described behaviour of others towards them that was exploitative did not view it as such. In a RHI, professionals can begin to work with a child to recognise grooming behaviour so that they can be supported in staying safe in the future. While a single RHI may not be sufficient for a child to recognise they are being exploited by someone they consider to be a friend or boyfriend/girlfriend, it can be a starting point and an opportunity to put in place follow up support on a longer term basis.

Case Study 5

Danielle, aged 15, was reported missing from home overnight following an argument with her mother.

On her return, she told police she had stayed at a female friend's house to have some time away from the conflict at home.

However in her RHI, Danielle disclosed that she and some friends had stayed with some older males and that she had drunk alcohol and smoked cannabis provided by the men while she was there.

Safeguarding concerns about Danielle were shared with children's services and the police and the RHI worker arranged a follow up visit to offer her further support.

Case Study 6

Liam, aged 13, was reported missing after not returning to his care home by curfew. On his return he told care home staff and the police that he'd just been into town.

In his RHI, Liam spoke about his low mood and said he had thoughts of killing himself, including during his missing episode, although he did not physically attempt to harm himself during his time away. Liam has ADHD and said he struggled at school.

After the RHI, the interviewer informed the MASH team, care home and Liam's Social Worker about his suicidal thoughts and continued to support Liam on a 1-to-1 basis. Liam's social worker referred him for a CAMHS assessment due to his mental health issues.

Case Study 7

Jessica, aged 14, went missing overnight from her care home. On her return, she told police at her safe and well check that she had stayed with a friend and was fine.

In her RHI she disclosed she had spent the night at the home of an adult male she had known for several months and that he had sexually assaulted her. Jessica was supported in reporting this incident to the police and details were also shared with children's services and her social worker.

Looked after children

Looked after children are at high risk of being reported missing.⁴⁰ Nationally, 1 in 10 looked after children are reported missing each year compared to 1 in 200 children in the general population.⁴¹ In the case study areas, close to two in five (39%) missing children were missing from care (across low, medium and high risk incidents). Looked after children were also more likely to go missing on multiple occasions; 57% were reported missing two or more times compared with 36% of other children. Looked after children accounted for over half (54%) of all missing incidents in the case study areas, reflecting the fact that they were reported missing more frequently.

Research suggests that as well as being at heightened risk of going missing, looked after children are also particularly likely to be harmed while away. They are more likely to have experienced abuse, neglect or trauma in the past, so when missing they are at a heightened risk of exploitation or of physical or sexual abuse.⁴² They are also more likely to be specifically targeted for sexual exploitation as *"perpetrators target children's homes specifically because of the high vulnerability of the children in them and how easily they can make contact with the children."*⁴³

This vulnerability was also evident in the case study areas:

- 19% of looked after children who completed an RHI in relation to a medium or low episode were currently a victim of CSE or had been in the past.
- 13% of looked after children were currently a victim of *criminal or other form of exploitation* or had experienced it in the past.

⁴⁰ Department for Education, *Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care*, 2014.

⁴¹ <https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/latest-news/1018-missing-people-publishes-latest-uk-statistics.html>

⁴² APPG for Looked after Children and Care Leavers, *Report from the Joint Inquiry into children who go missing from care*, 2012.

⁴³ Ibid.

They also disclosed information relating to a range of other risks including:

- One in four (41%) shared information relating to substance misuse and one in three (35%) about alcohol misuse.
- Close to one in five (18%) were identified as at risk due to a mental health issue.
- One in ten (10%) presented as at risk of self-harm.

Difficulties arising from being in care were frequently identified as a trigger for the missing episode. Half (50%) of looked after children mentioned placement or care home issues as contributing to them going missing, while one in three (35%) said they went missing in order to spend time with family.

Young people who are not known or open to any services

Three in ten (31%) of all children who were missing in the three case study areas were not known or open to any services at the time they ran away. They account for just 14% of all missing incidents as they were much less likely to go missing on multiple occasions than looked after children; fewer than one in four (23%) were reported missing more than once.⁴⁴

For children who are not already known or open to children's services, an RHI is likely to be the first intervention they receive from a professional. It is therefore an extremely valuable opportunity to make an initial risk assessment and determine whether a child is in need of further support. This is important given the level of need revealed in RHIs with these children in the case study areas:

- One in three (33%) shared information relating to one or more of the five factors that could be seen as a 'red flag' for CSE.
- Nearly one in twenty (4%) were a current victim of CSE or had been a victim of this in the past.
- Approaching half (45%) had issues with truancy, poor school attendance or exclusion from school.

⁴⁴ However, it is worth noting that given the remit of the methodology used in this report, it is likely that at least some of these children were reported missing outside the 9 months considered here. It is also likely that looked after children will be reported missing more quickly than those who are not known to services, for example if they stay out after curfew.

- More than one in three (36%) were identified as having low self-esteem or poor self-confidence.
- One in four children (24%) were identified as having a mental health issue.
- One in four (25%) shared information about substance misuse and around one in eight (13%) about alcohol misuse.
- One in nine (11%) identified themselves as involved in offending in some way.
- One in twenty (5%) had some history of abuse and the same proportion had physical injuries at the time of the RHI.

Parents and carers

An RHI is an opportunity for a child to speak with a professional on their return from missing and is focused on the child's perspectives, experiences and needs. However, parents and carers can provide a useful additional perspective. Many of the RHIs in the case study areas incorporated some form of discussion with parents or carers, whether as part of initial attempts to contact the young person or immediately before or after the RHI if this took place in the home or care setting. In most cases this was a relatively brief conversation, but in others a more lengthy discussion was appropriate. These conversations often provided the RHI worker with a valuable additional perspective into the child's missing episode and current situation, including their relationships with family members, which could then be explored in the RHI and shared with relevant agencies together with the child's own responses.⁴⁵

Equally, parents and carers can play an important role in safeguarding children. RHI content was not routinely shared with parents or carers in the case study areas, but in a minority of cases, the RHI worker shared some or all of the information if this was appropriate and the child consented to this. This was done to help those parent or carers to support the child more effectively and, if needed, to help them access relevant services.

⁴⁵ While the perspectives of parents and carers were valued, the RHI approach taken in the case study areas remained child-centred. Moreover, when information was shared with other agencies, it was made clear what information had been provided by the child and what by the parent or carer.

Conversations with the RHI team can also be an important source of support for parents and carers as they can share their concerns with a professional and receive advice and guidance. Many parents or carers expressed anxiety about the young person's wellbeing, ranging from concerns they were being exploited to worries about their mental health. Some also expressed feelings of helplessness about what to do to best support their child or how to get them professional help. In these instances, the RHI team were able to offer guidance and signpost parents to relevant local services.

Finally, there were also examples in the case study areas of the RHI team's conversation with a parent or carer revealing the parent or carer was themselves in need of support for an issue that if not dealt with could impact on the child's wellbeing. In some instances this was sufficiently serious to raise a safeguarding concern for that child, in others a parent or carer just needed encouragement or advice to help them access support.

Case Study 8

Harry, aged 15, had been going missing with increased frequency in recent weeks. His parents disclosed before the RHI that they were extremely concerned about this and the fact he had been becoming increasingly secretive about who he was spending time with. Harry had also been found with significant amounts of cash and a new mobile phone but would not talk to his parents about where he got these.

Harry refused to talk about these issues in the RHI, but the RHI staff member made a 101 report based on the information shared by his parents.

Case Study 9

Daisy, aged 15, lives at home with her mother, Janet. She was not currently known to services when she went missing for several days.

The RHI was conducted at her home and the RHI staff member had a lengthy conversation with her mother, Janet, beforehand. Janet disclosed that she was struggling to cope with Daisy and that she (Janet) had been having suicidal thoughts because she felt isolated and believed that no one was listening to her.

With Janet's permission, Missing People shared this information with children's services due to the safeguarding concerns arising from Janet's current mental health and the potential impact on Daisy. Janet confirmed she was happy for the local authority to check in with her about her and Daisy's wellbeing and to offer her further guidance and support.

RHI Outcomes and Information Sharing

As evidenced above, RHIs are a valuable opportunity for children to talk about what happened to them while missing and explore their wider concerns or problems, particularly any which might have contributed to them going missing. The child is listened to in a supportive setting where they can share their worries and concerns and their perspective and experiences are respected. One child who took part in an RHI said that *“It was really good to be able to talk to someone about my situation... because I had been keeping everything in.”*

In addition to emotional support, RHIs can also have a range of other positive outcomes. These can be grouped into three broad categories:

1. Advice and assistance provided directly to a child to help keep them safe in the future, including follow up support and/or referral to other services if appropriate.
2. Information sharing with relevant agencies about an individual child with a view to minimising their risk of harm.
3. Information sharing with these relevant agencies as a valuable source of wider intelligence and to inform wider safeguarding action.

All three of these are important in reducing risk of harm and tackling exploitation.

1. Helping the child to stay safe and access support

RHIs should *“help the child feel safe and understand that they have options to prevent repeat instances of them running away [and] provide them with information on how to stay safe if they run away again, including helpline numbers.”*

Department for Education, 2014

RHIs provide an opportunity to:

- Share information about helpline services with the child
- Offer and provide follow up or 1-2-1 support
- Refer or signpost to services, including CAMHS, GPs and other support services
- Safety plan with that child and help them to understand their situation

All 214 children who took part in an RHI with Missing People in relation to a medium or low risk incident were signposted to the charity’s services, including the 24-7, confidential 116 000 helpline number, as a source of support if they run away again or are considering doing so.

Close to one in five (18%) were either offered or provided with regular 1-to-1 support by Missing People following their RHI. This 1-to-1 support is designed to give practical and emotional support to children on issues such as self-esteem, safe relationships, bullying and safety planning. A further 12% of children agreed to be contacted in a single follow up call or visit. This was a more informal opportunity to follow up on the issues raised in the RHI and could include a further discussion or more practical support.

Children were also helped to access support from other agencies where appropriate, either by signposting or referrals to agencies such as CAMHS, GPs and local services which address drug and alcohol misuse amongst others issues. Examples in the case study areas include:

- A 13-year-old girl, who was identified as at high risk of going missing again due to her mental health issues and volatile relationships at home, was provided with advice and strategies in case she went missing in the future, referred to CAMHS, and supported in accessing a service which provides emotional support to young people.
- A 15-year-old girl who reported taking drugs while missing. She discussed her substance misuse in detail in the RHI and said she would like support with this. The RHI staff member signposted her to two local services which offer support with substance misuse and contacted children's services to request a referral be made for her.
- A 17-year-old boy, who had been going missing with increasing frequency and who felt his life lacked direction, talked about his frustration about not being in education or employment currently. Missing People made an appointment for him to receive help writing a CV at a local centre which offers careers and education support for young people.

An RHI is also an opportunity to support a child to reflect on the triggers for their missing episode and explore strategies for addressing these. In the case study areas, children discussed future strategies for a range of challenges including dealing with conflict with parents and carers, anger management, coping with mental health issues, and resolving care placement issues. As noted previously, RHIs can also be an opportunity for the child to reflect on their relationships and begin to recognise the negative impact of exploitative relationships.

Case study 10

Sam, aged 15, was living with his parents and went missing after an argument with his father.

In his RHI, he described having a difficult relationship with his father and said their daily arguments had led to deterioration in his mental health. He also talked about struggling to control his anger after the arguments. Sam felt his father was too strict and expressed a desire to have more freedom.

The RHI worker talked at length with Sam about respect and together they identified strategies that might help Sam and his father to earn greater respect from each other.

Case study 11

Mia, aged 17, was reported missing by her foster carers when she failed to return home one evening. In her RHI, she spoke about how her and two friends spent the night in a house with a number of adult men after being taken there by a male friend who had described it as a party. Mia and her friends were the only females there and she did not know any of the men other than the friend who drove them there.

Mia said she felt extremely vulnerable that night and had been encouraged to drink alcohol and take drugs, although she had refused. She also reported that she hadn't told police the full story as she had told them they had just watched DVDs and slept on the floor.

Mia was supported in reflecting on her friendships and agreed she should distance herself from them in the future as she didn't want to be in another situation like this. She was encouraged to revive friendships with other school friends that she felt were a more positive influence. Information was shared with relevant professionals after the RHI, with Mia's consent, to ensure she would be appropriately safeguarded.

The therapeutic benefits that RHIs can potentially offer are summed up in feedback from one child who received an RHI in the case study area. She spoke of the positive impact of talking with an independent person about the whole range of challenges she was dealing with and identified the RHI as a turning point in her life:

“So for me speaking to [RHI staff member] was the first time I got to fully talk about everything that had happened, to finally put pieces together that before didn’t make sense because I never took a step back to think about it. It helped me get everything off my chest that had been bottled up for so long. At first it was difficult but I now realise it was for the best to talk about it... One of the biggest parts which made a difference for me, which may sound a bit silly, was saying it all out loud, to remind myself of realisation and that certain things that happen to me wasn’t okay and that I wasn’t to accept that sort of behaviour in my life and then started the process of understanding how to not let it happen again. Overall the return interview was really the kick start in starting my recovery and a broken few years.”

A child who took part in an RHI

2. Information sharing relating to an individual child

Understanding why a child ran away is a vital tool for professionals in assessing risk and planning for the future safeguarding of that child.

In many cases a missing incident is triggered by a combination of factors. However, services available for vulnerable children are usually specific to one type of risk or issue, for example sexual exploitation or gangs support. In some situations children will ‘fall through the gaps’ as they have not been specifically identified as requiring those services, despite going missing which suggests a vulnerability or risk. RHIs can provide an opportunity to look at a child’s situation more holistically and initiate help for more than one type of need by sharing that information with other agencies. Crucially, RHIs are one of the only interventions which do not require a child to meet a particular need threshold. For some children it may be the first chance to disclose ongoing harm, and for a professional to have the time to identify risks.

For children who are already receiving some professional support, information from the RHI can be shared with those agencies involved with that child in the longer term. For others, the RHI may be the first intervention they receive.

RHIs can play a key role in safeguarding vulnerable children on their return from missing:

- A 16-year-old girl who disclosed that she is in a relationship with an older male well known to police and children’s services whose ex-girlfriend told professionals he was physically and mentally abusive towards her. During her RHI, she had talked about her deep-rooted

mistrust of the police and as a result had shared extremely limited information with police on her return.

- A 13-year-old boy who described having friends aged 17 and 18 who "stick up for me". He shared that these older friends provided him with money, but refused to say what he had to do in return. He also said that he regularly carries a knife for self-protection.
- A 12-year-old girl who spoke about her step-parent's excessive disciplining of her which had caused her to run away.
- A 16-year-old girl who, after the interviewer noticed scratches on her arm, admitted she had been self-harming.
- A 15-year-old boy who disclosed information in his RHI which raised concerns regarding his coping mechanisms, alcohol and substance misuse, self-harming behaviours and vulnerability due to his peer network. The content of the RHI was shared at a multi-agency group and a robust support package was then implemented for him including drug work intervention.

In some instances, these risks were suspected or at least partly known to professionals prior to the RHI but in others they were completely new disclosures. Safeguarding referrals made for children not open to services were particularly likely to be in relation to an issue not previously reported or discussed with any other professionals.

Even if the RHI doesn't identify a specific safeguarding issue, it can still reveal a need for further support for the child; for example in relation to mental health, substance or alcohol misuse, relationships or some other need. It can also lead to disclosures of crimes they have been a victim of while away or previously. Children in the case study areas who had been a victim of crime were supported in reporting this to the police.⁴⁶

RHIs are therefore a valuable source of information about the child, which in almost all cases can be shared with relevant agencies. For 90% of missing episodes addressed in an RHI, the child gave consent for all information to be shared with the police and children's services, including the child's social worker if they had one. In just 2% of episodes was no information shared with police and

⁴⁶ Wherever possible the young person was encouraged to report the crime themselves, with support from the RHI worker if needed. On other occasions, the child might ask the RHI worker to share details with the police with their consent. In a minority of occasions the child's confidentiality would be breached in order to make a report to the police if deemed necessary to ensure they would be adequately safeguarded.

children's services at the child's request. For the remaining 8% of episodes, either consent was given to share some information, or safeguarding considerations were deemed to override consent and at least partial information was shared.

The information disclosed by the young person in the RHI can also be shared more widely when appropriate. For 12% of children, the information was shared with one or more of the following: parents, family members, foster carers, children's homes, school or other agencies with the child's consent. The aim of this information sharing is to help those individuals and agencies involved in the child's care in supporting and safeguarding them. One example of this in the case study areas is a 14-year-old boy who disclosed he was anxious and regularly had thoughts about self-harming, particularly when alone in his room at the care home, although he hadn't acted on these. With his consent, the RHI worker spoke to his residential home team who then met with him to discuss this and agree strategies to minimise the risk of him self-harming.

Case study 12

Ali, aged 16, was reported missing after failing to return to his care home by curfew.

On his return he told police that he had just been spending time with friends but in his RHI he disclosed that while away he had been threatened by a local gang because he had recently refused to drug run for them. He had not disclosed this information in his safe and well check but was supported in reporting the incident to the police.

A safeguarding referral was made for him and his care home team informed so they could ensure Ali did not go out alone in the local area while the threat remained.

RHIs also provide valuable information that can be used to develop a safety plan for that child and so help to safeguard them if they go missing again. Relevant details collected in return interviews include:

- Push and pull factors
- Known associates
- Descriptions of where they went while missing and with whom

Even if a safety plan isn't developed, this information when shared can still assist the police in any future missing person investigation and risk assessment for that young person. Given this, it is important that there are appropriate systems in place to ensure this information is shared with the police and accessible in the event of the child going missing again.

3. Information sharing as a way of building wider intelligence

The information gathered in RHIs is also an important source of wider intelligence for the police, children’s services and other agencies, particularly when information from multiple RHIs and multiple children are viewed collectively. RHIs are an opportunity to:

- Gather wider intelligence for the police and children’s services, in particular relating to CCE and CSE.
- Compare information collected in multiple RHIs with different young people to identify local patterns, such as common perpetrators of exploitation.
- Identify other young people who may be at risk.

In the case study areas, information collected in RHIs was reviewed at regular weekly and monthly multi-agency meetings where it could be combined with intelligence from other sources. This approach enables professionals to identify connections between young people and patterns of exploitative or criminal behaviour.

RHIs can be “a useful tool for social services and police to collect intelligence about perpetrators and locations where grooming might be taking place.”

House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, 2013

In relation to CSE and CCE, children’s disclosures in an RHI can help to identify potential perpetrators and ‘hot spots’ of exploitation or criminal activity.⁴⁷ Children in the case study areas were encouraged to provide names and information about their older associates, some of whom may be known to the police or named in RHIs by other children in the local area. As we might expect, not all children were willing to make such a full disclosure in their RHI, particularly in terms of naming perpetrators. However, many children felt able to share at least some information relating to exploitative situations that was of value to multi-agency teams responsible for tackling exploitation in the local area.

In addition, some children shared information in their RHI about criminal activity or safeguarding concerns relating to people other than themselves, often other children. Examples of these types of disclosures include:

⁴⁷ Department for Education, *Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care*, 2014.

- A 13-year-old boy who disclosed he had witnessed a member of staff at his care home assault another resident.
- A 10-year-old girl said that her friend was being "beaten up" at home by their parents, but was too afraid to report this. She said her friend had severe bruising.
- A 15-year-old girl who talked about an incident the previous year where she had been raped by an adult man. While this incident had been reported to the police, in her RHI she disclosed details about other children she said this man had met with since. This information was shared with the police via a 101 report due to concerns for the safety of these children.

The role that RHIs can have in not only supporting individual children but also in contributing to wider intelligence is highlighted in the following quote from a police officer:

“Building A Rapport With The Young And Vulnerable Allowing Us To Protect”

“The Return Home Interview Process has been such an integral, insightful and impactful part of policing when dealing with missing children and the most vulnerable.

The professional who is conducting the Return Home Interviews is able to build a rapport with the young person and through gaining their trust and providing reassurance, meaningful intelligence is obtained.

This information is then efficiently recorded and developed by police so that an intelligence picture can be completed and safeguarding measures put in place. This process has been so invaluable and it helps the Police in being able to represent, reassure and protect our most vulnerable young people.”

Police Officer based in a Missing Person Unit

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

This report shows that RHIs:

- Can identify ongoing risks and harm that has already been experienced or are being experienced by young people.
- Can identify risks and harm previously not known to services.
- Can provide an opportunity for getting help to children at a point when they might need it most.
- Can help to inform police investigations and wider safeguarding efforts to reduce future risk of harm to the interviewed child and other children.

Recommendation 1: all children should continue to be offered RHIs, regardless of police risk assessment level.

RHIs are a valuable tool for early intervention in addressing the reasons why a young person has gone missing, including identification of risk of CSE, CCE, problems at school or home, and many other types of harm. They provide an opportunity for children to disclose harm and for appropriate action to be taken before further escalation of any risk the child is facing.

This research shows that serious harm and ongoing risks are not confined to the high risk minority but are regularly disclosed during RHIs by children whose missing episode had been assessed as low or medium risk. In some cases this information was not previously known to the police or other professionals so had not been taken into consideration in risk assessments.

It is vital that the offer of a RHI is not dependent on police risk assessment: this would risk allowing harm to remain hidden and for children to fall through the net.

Recommendation 2: RHIs should be used as an opportunity for early identification of risks to address a range of different harms associated with missing.

RHIs are one of very few professional safeguarding interventions which are not reliant on the child meeting specific thresholds for a particular 'type' of risk, thresholds which are growing increasingly high in many cases.

Many services available for vulnerable children are specific to one type of risk or issue, for example, CSE or CCE services. This ensures that the professionals working in those fields can be truly expert,

and is often necessary because of the commissioning process. However, this siloed approach can be detrimental for children who are vulnerable but have not yet become victims of serious harm, or for those who are experiencing multiple forms of harm or exploitation, which sadly is often the case. RHIs can provide a holistic service through which variety of risks faced by children and young can be identified in just one intervention.

Recommendation 3: All return interview services should include the opportunity for follow up support

Although this report makes it clear that RHIs are an important service for identifying harm and providing an initial intervention for vulnerable children, a one-off conversation is not enough to be considered as effective support for children who have experienced trauma, have complex needs or are at ongoing risk.

Robust information sharing protocols, including clear pathways for fast referrals to specialist services will ensure continuing support for some; however, this may not always be enough. This can be for a number of reasons:

- In some areas specialist services may not be available to make a referral into
- Thresholds for specialist services may be too high for the child to qualify at the point of referral, or there may be long waiting lists
- Having made a disclosure to a specific worker or service the child may feel trust in them which would be lost if they were simply 'handed over' to another service

It is therefore important that there is the opportunity for follow-up support within the RHI service, this can allow children to build trust and to get ongoing help without needing to 'qualify' for a specialist service.

Many of the examples used in this report involved short or long-term follow up support to ensure that the children were effectively safeguarded or successfully transitioned into other services. For some of the children mentioned in those examples it is likely that a singular intervention, even with safeguarding referrals, would not have led to as positive outcomes.

Other research available on return interviews supports this recommendation. Railway Children's 2015 report⁴⁸ found significant benefits for children and young people who received a return interview with follow up support, these included:

- Reduced episodes of running away
- Young people having a more positive view of their future
- Reduced risk

The evidence in this report clearly shows the value of RHIs as an opportunity to engage children and young people at a crucial moment for intervention; to identify harm or ongoing risks; to make referrals and get children the help they may desperately need. However, these interviews cannot stand alone as a safeguarding tool. Effective follow-up support would ensure a greater chance of protecting children and preventing them from going missing again.

Recommendation 4: Findings from RHIs should be effectively shared, recorded and included in safety planning

The findings in this report clearly show that valuable information can be gathered during an RHI, sometimes including information that hasn't previously been disclosed to or is not known by professionals. This information can be crucial to the future safeguarding of that child and potentially other children, for example those at risk from the same perpetrators of exploitation.

Information disclosed during an RHI should be shared with relevant agencies, including the police and children's services. However, as an RHI needs to be a confidential safe space for a child to talk about missing, unless there are serious safeguarding concerns, the child's consent should always be sought to share this information.

However, previous research and operational experience shows that the information is often not shared in an effective way, and is not always used to inform the safety planning or care plans for children, despite disclosures of risk and harm.⁴⁹

If serious disclosures made during an RHI are not shared, recorded and taken into account when professionals are supporting that child, this is a failure in effective safeguarding. It also undermines the child's trust as their voice and concerns have not been listened to and acted upon.

⁴⁸ Railway Children, *The value of Return Home Interviews and follow-up support*, 2015.

⁴⁹ "Where information is shared it is not always used. Our practitioners stated they frequently felt that information from RHIs is effectively shared with children's services. However, when it comes to utilising that information the problems begin." (Making Connections, research by The Children's Society)

Recommendation 5: The Department for Education and Ofsted should provide more robust oversight to ensure that statutory guidance is adhered to.

Statutory guidance requires an RHI to be offered to all children when they return from missing. However, the guidance available on what good looks like in relation to RHIs is relatively limited and, although Ofsted include performance in delivering RHIs in their inspections, there is still too little national oversight to ensure that a good quality service is being delivered in all areas.

The Statutory Guidance states that for children who accept the offer of an RHI “*the interview should be carried out within 72 hours of the child returning to their home or care setting*”⁵⁰ and this timeliness aspect is regularly a key focus of inspections.⁵¹ While an urgent response is important, there has been little evidence that 72 hours is the right amount of time. There are concerns amongst providers that by focusing on this the quality and overall impact of the RHI can be overlooked, despite those factors being more important to the child’s experience and opportunities for safeguarding.

More broadly, research⁵² has suggested that the provision of RHIs is inconsistent and that it is difficult to identify good or poor practice because information is gathered and held in a variety of ways, with no national collection to allow comparative analysis. Increased oversight from the Department for Education and Ofsted, including refreshed guidance on delivery and how information is recorded, would not only ensure that all local authorities are offering good quality RHIs to every child when they return from missing, but would also allow for a better understanding of the national picture— both in terms of delivery, and the issues and risks being identified within the RHIs themselves.

⁵⁰ Department for Education, *Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care*, 2014.

⁵¹ <https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/about-us/about-the-issue/policy-parliamentary-work/175-english-coalition-for-runaway-children/1033-rhi-good-practice.html>

⁵² Chetwynd, H. and Pona, I. *Making Connections*, The Children’s Society, 2017.

APPENDIX A:

Profile of population – Medium and Low risk incidents

There were **1,439 reported missing incidents** judged to be medium or low risk by the police in the three case study areas between July 2017 and March 2018. As some young people went missing on two or more occasions over the nine months, these 1,439 missing episodes involved **511 young people**.

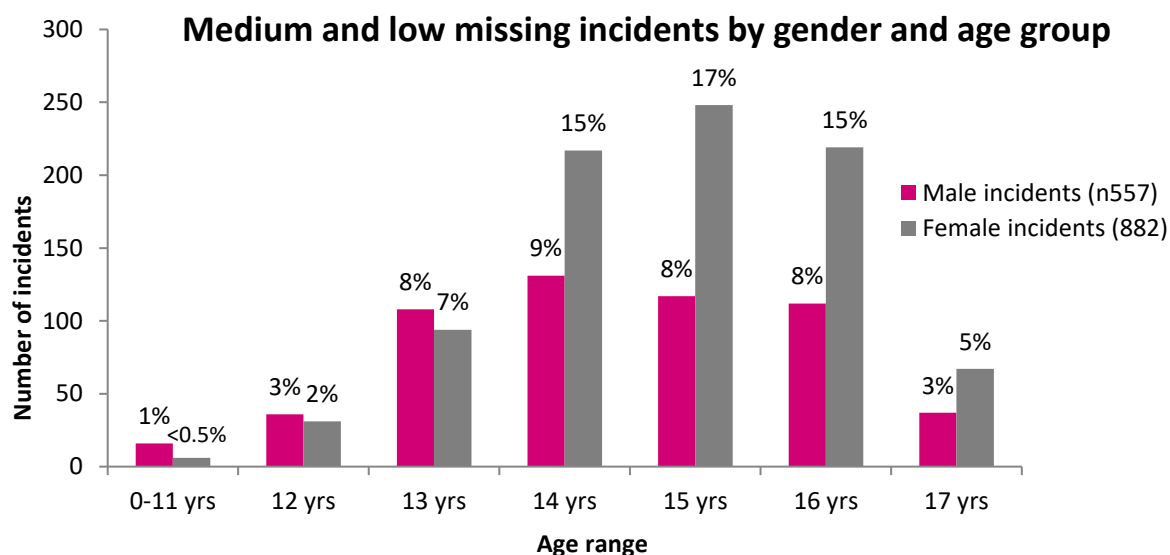
These 1,439 incidents represented 97% of all reported missing episodes. The other 3% of episodes (n51) were investigated as high risk incidents. These have been excluded from the main analysis as they receive a more resource-intensive response, often because a young person is already known to be extremely vulnerable or in significant danger, and this study aims to better understand the level of harm faced by the majority of young people who go missing in incidents assessed to be medium or low risk.⁵³

Age and gender

Close to three in four of the 1,439 medium and low risk missing episodes involved young people aged 14-16 (73%), with just 1% relating to children aged 10 or younger.

Girls were more likely to be reported missing; they accounted for 61% of medium and low risk missing episodes. This is particularly noticeable in the upper age groups, as around two in three episodes for 14-17 year olds (65%) related to girls, while incidents for children aged 13 or younger were more likely to involve boys (55%). These age and gender variations are broadly in line with the national picture.

⁵³ Missing People were made aware of 1,921 missing episodes from July 2017 – March 2018. A Police Risk Assessment code was not provided for 22% of these, so these were excluded from the analysis, which resulted in the final number included in the analysis of 1,490 episodes of which 3.5% were high risk, 92.5% were medium risk and 4% low risk. This amounted to 1,439 medium and low risk episodes and 51 that were high risk.



Frequency of missing

Compared to adults, children are significantly more likely to go missing on multiple occasions. Nationally, 59% of missing person investigations involving children and young people are due to repeat missing episodes (NCA, 2017:17).

In the three case study local authorities, the proportion is even higher; almost two in three of medium and low risk incidents (64%) were due to repeat missing. Moreover, a relatively small number of these young people accounted for a high proportion of incidents – nearly one in four episodes (n337) involved one of sixteen young people who went missing 15 or more times including one young person who was reported missing on 45 occasions. Despite going missing so regularly, virtually all of these young people's missing incidents were assessed as medium (or occasionally even low) risk by the police. Going missing and doing so repeatedly is a clear sign of vulnerability and these young people are at risk of harm on a regular basis. This clearly illustrates that young people deemed to be medium or low risk while away may nevertheless be in significant need of support on return.

APPENDIX B:**Comparisons with high risk episodes**

The majority of the analysis in this report has focused on medium and low risk missing incidents. However, over the same nine month period there were 51 high risk missing episodes involving 42 young people.

Number of young people with a high risk episode	42
Number reported missing more than once	23 (55%)
Number of high risk episodes	51
Percentage of high risk episodes involving girls being reported missing	37 (73%)

Two in five (41%) high risk episodes involved looked after children, 43% related to children who were open to services but not living in care, and 16% involved children who were not previously known to any services.

Fifteen children took part in one or more RHI following a high risk missing episode. These numbers are too small to make statistically significant comparisons between high risk and other episodes, but it is nevertheless helpful to consider the risks reported by these children.

- Over half – eight of the fifteen children whose incident was high risk – shared information that raised at least one of five ‘red flag’ risk indicators for CSE.
- Five of the fifteen ‘high risk’ children had experienced or were currently a victim of sexual exploitation.
- Six of the fifteen ‘high risk’ children were identified as having mental health issues.

Even if risk levels are higher among this group – although the numbers involved in this analysis are too small to say conclusively – the proportion identified as high risk remains low and it does not negate the considerable need identified among medium and low risk children. Moreover, as the police risk assessment relates to that particular incident, it is not a holistic assessment of a child’s

safeguarding needs. Many of the fifteen children assessed to be high risk were assessed to be at medium or even low risk when they went missing again over the nine month period, despite their RHIs often revealing a similar level of need on both occasions.

Moreover, police risk assessments have been shown to be subjective and at times can be affected by assumptions and preconceptions. For example, there is a greater tendency to see adolescent girls as at high risk of harm compared to boys of the same age, as is evident by the fact that three-quarters of children assessed as absent⁵⁴ are adolescent boys.⁵⁵ Young males are also less likely to be identified as vulnerable to sexual exploitation.⁵⁶ *“There is a risk that when children and young people are seen to be ‘streetwise’ or making their own ‘lifestyle choice’ professionals can end up seeing repeated absence as an indicator of lower risk”.*⁵⁷ It is important that RHIs are offered to all children on their return from missing and that the offer is not affected by the priorities or assumptions that might have shaped the initial police risk assessment.

Given this, and the high levels of risk revealed by this analysis among children who go missing in medium or low risk episodes, it is clear that RHIs play a vital role in supporting and safeguarding a wide range of young people on their return from missing, not just those that are judged to be at high risk while still away.

⁵⁴ An absent person is defined in national police guidance as a “person not at a place where they are expected or required to be” and perceived to be “not at any apparent risk”. When someone is categorised as absent, no police response is required except to monitor and review the situation.

⁵⁵ Chetwynd, H. and Pona, I. *Making Connections*, The Children’s Society, 2017

⁵⁶ http://www.barnardos.org.uk/news/press_releases.htm?ref=130052

⁵⁷ Sturrock, R. and Holmes, L. *Running the Risks: The links between gang involvement and young people going missing*, 2015.

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