



EMERALD POINTS

REPEATEDLY MISSING CHILDREN

Multi-Agency Partnerships for
Safeguarding and Prevention in
England and Wales

KIRSTY BENNETT



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Safeguarding and Prevention in
England and Wales

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACPO	Association of Chief Police Officers
ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
APP	Authorised Professional Practice
CCE	Child Criminal Exploitation
COMPACT	Community Policing and Tracking
CoP	College of Policing
CSE	Child Sexual Exploitation
DSM	Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders
ECRC	English Coalition for Runaway Children
FIS	Family Intervention Service
HMIC	Her Majesty's Inspectorate Constabulary
HMICFRS	Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services
ICMEC	International Centre for Missing and Exploited Children
IO	Investigating Officer
IRO	Investigating Review Officer
MASH	Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub
MP	Missing Persons/People
NCA	National Crime Agency
NDM	National Decision-Making Model
NPCC	National Police Chiefs Council
OIC	Officer in Case
PI	Prevention Interview
POLSA	Police Search Advisor
MACE	Multi-Agency Child Exploitation Meetings
MAST	Multi-Agency Safeguarding Team
MFHT	Missing from Home Team
RHIs	Return Home Interviews
RMC	Repeatedly Missing Children
SDQ	Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire
SEU	Social Exclusion Unit
SIO	Senior Investigating Officer
SPOC	Single Point of Contact

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ABOUT THIS BOOK

This book demonstrates the substantial risks facing children who go missing repeatedly. Over the years, the view is that these children are problematic, unlikely to experience harm, and a drain on public resources. Yet, these children can be exposed to places, spaces and people who could cause, or expose, them to some type of harm, or be otherwise detrimental to their wellbeing. Therefore, these risks and harms must be understood, and this book explores these through examination of the child's voices and experiences, and those of practitioners who regularly work with repeatedly missing children. Further, multi-agency partnerships to safeguard children and how their needs are addressed are discussed, showcasing ongoing efforts and where further research is needed.

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UNDERSTANDING MISSING CHILDREN

INTRODUCTION

Every 90 seconds, on average, someone is reported missing in the United Kingdom (Missing People, n.d.). This equated to nearly 70,000 missing children in 2022–2023 (National Crime Agency [NCA], 2021; UK Missing Persons Unit, 2022). Someone is understood to be missing if their ‘whereabouts cannot be established [and] will be considered as missing until located, and their wellbeing or otherwise confirmed’ (College of Policing, 2016). This definition is broad, and so many scenarios related to missing persons (MPs) could fall under this term. However, MPs place a substantial demand on public resources, like police forces, social services, healthcare and education. Each of these agencies has different remits and responsibilities for MPs, and it could be argued that some have more ownership and demands than others. Further, each of the agencies may become involved with MPs at different times. For example, while the police remain the first port of call for MPs (Collie, 2021), social services may become involved later. Typically, the police will deal with the case in the first instance whereas social care is more focused on the long-term support and well-being needs of the individual.

Nevertheless, the financial costs for all public services involved with MPs are estimated to range between £394 and £700 million per year (Shalev Greene & Pakes, 2014; Sidebottom et al., 2020; Wade, 2015). The figure also includes the estimated costs of personnel assigned to these cases, which have been found to exceed the investigative costs of both burglaries and assaults each year (Shalev Greene & Pakes, 2014). However, this can only ever be an estimate as each case will take different periods of time to be concluded, which explains the significant variability in the reported costs. Further, if the MP experiences harm, this will increase both financial costs and personnel allocations. Thus,

based on the economic impact alone of MPs, there is a need to proportionately manage and investigate MPs to reduce or avoid harm being experienced and crimes being committed by or against the MP. The primary purpose of reduction efforts, namely through initiatives devised by police forces, is to prevent individuals who go missing from being over-criminalised through unnecessary police interactions when the circumstances do not warrant their involvement. It is, however, a careful balancing act of ensuring that MPs are safe but not over-criminalised.

The costs for missing children specifically can further increase if they are repeatedly missing. Repeatedly missing children (RMC) have no specific definition, with variable conceptualisations in policy, practice, and research. For this text, RMC is acknowledged as those with two or more missing episodes within 30 days. Yet, whether such episodes are a singular episode or as part of a series, there can be multiple, complex and multifaceted explanations for the missing episodes. Research has broadly conceptualised missing episodes as either push or pull factors (sometimes also referred to as ‘triggers’ and ‘incidents’: Babuta & Sidebottom, 2020; Biehal & Wade, 2000; Rees, 1993; Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999; Shalev Greene, 2010; Wade et al., 1998). *Push factors* generally encourage a child to leave a situation, with examples being violence, conflict, or abuse in the home or substance misuse (by the parents/carers or the young person themselves). Push factors may be long-term (e.g., a build-up of emotional turmoil) or an immediate issue that may be dangerous, uncomfortable or unwanted by the child, causing them to seek an immediate escape. Hirschel and Lab (1988) found in their study that children will also go missing to escape neglect, which is another push factor. Thus, the child can go missing because of these actual or perceived harmful situations. Conversely, *pull factors* entice and encourage a child to a situation, like seeing friends (Babuta & Sidebottom, 2020). An example of a pull factor is missing curfew or travelling beyond a boundary defined by caregivers, allowing them to stay out longer with friends, which can be a voluntary choice.

Push and pull factors are just one way of understanding why children might go missing. While it might not always be that straightforward, or easily conceptualised, with some episodes being fluid and dynamic in cause and justification. Importantly, the reasons identified in one missing episode might not be the same as those in later episodes for RMC. Therefore, the alternative continuum proposed by Biehal et al. (2003) is a valuable tool, whereby harm might be *intentional* or *unintentional*.

Intentional episodes are those where someone makes a conscious choice to go missing, and they are likely aware that this will result in a report being made to the police. Examples of intentionally missing episodes might include

going out with friends even if their parents/carers have said that they cannot, or meeting with friends that they are not allowed to see or choosing not to attend school despite telling their parents that they would. For these scenarios, the child is perceived to be at a low risk of harm while missing, as they have made a conscious choice to deviate from expected behaviour.

Intentional missing episodes might explain the societal perception of missingness. Generally, going missing is a societal problem rather than a criminal one, and there is no specific legislation that states that going missing is an offence. However, there is a murky line between adults and children, where over 18s can choose to go missing if they wish to do so. For children, or those with a lack of suitable capacity (e.g., adults diagnosed with Alzheimer's or other mental health conditions), it is more complex because there are inherent vulnerabilities in their daily lives which can be exacerbated when they go missing. Thus, there is a need to locate them quickly to prevent them from experiencing either accidental or deliberate harm.

Instead, the social care needs of missing people perhaps warrant less involvement from the police and more from social agencies, like school safeguarding officers, social services, and youth and family workers. This belief is underpinned primarily through the implementation of a relatively new framework led by the National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC): the *Levels of Intervention* model. These are discussed later in the book, and while representing the efforts ongoing to manage resources effectively and protect MPs, this does not necessarily equate to positive receptions by all stakeholders.

Nevertheless, at the more extreme end of the continuum proposed by Biehal et al. (2003) is the 'forced', and primarily unintentional, missing episodes, which typically involve third-party influence or involvement. Forced missing episodes could be a push or pull factor, like in cases of sexual exploitation. For example, the exploiter serving as the third party could force the child to leave so that they can be further exploited. Alternatively, grooming and exploitation might be a push factor where the child leaves to avoid their exploiter (Tansill, 2021). While this demonstrates the fluid nature of missing episodes, it also reflects the influence of others in some missing episodes. Yet, while sexual exploitation has become more known to the public following scandals like Rotherham and Rochdale, the public is perhaps most cognisant of missing episodes resulting in fatal, irreparable harm, which also become high-profile. Examples include James Bulger in 1993, Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman in 2007, and April Jones in 2012. All these cases had a missing, forced, episode before they were recovered murdered.

Although there might be multiple reasons and justifications for some missing children becoming newsworthy and of significant interest, the child's

age is a determining factor. Very young children cannot voluntarily go missing and so there is often a substantial and swift police responses needed, as was the case in Madeleine McCann's disappearance.

On the 3rd of May 2007, Kate McCann discovered her three-year-old daughter, Madeleine, missing from their holiday apartment in Portugal. Despite extensive searches and investigations, Madeline was not located. Eighteen years later, Madeleine's case is still active and a priority for law enforcement. In both England and Portugal, significant financial investments and personnel deployments for her investigation have been allocated by the police. As recently as June 2025, new searches were conducted, but they were unsuccessful in recovering Madeleine or discovering further clues about her whereabouts and fate. Nevertheless, the notification of these new searches was broadcast across the world, with substantial coverage across different platforms and outlets (e.g., newspapers, televised news, social media sites). Greer and McLaughlin (2012) described this interest as a process of 'intermediatisation', whereby her disappearance and subsequent searches and investigative activity feature prominently in all types of media.

There are numerous podcasts, documentaries, news stories and online networked discussion sites (e.g., Websleuths, Reddit) devoted to Madeleine's disappearance. Some of these are factual accounts, designed primarily to inform the public of the investigation. In contrast, others are more prophetic, rife with unsubstantiated predictions and conspiracies that are not necessarily supported by facts. The public's interest in the case, from the outset of her disappearance, has incentivised the media to follow the case and any developments closely. If the press had not prioritised Madeleine's case so extensively, the media interest might not have been so extensive. Yet, the journalists and editors likely appreciated, from experience, what news stories are of most interest to their audiences.

However, when Madeleine disappeared, so too did approximately 70,000¹ children in England and Wales. Thus, an important question must be raised: how did this one case dominate the public and media interest so quickly and then for such a long period? Despite disappearing in Portugal, the British Police have been providing financial support (more than £13 million²) and

1 This figure is estimated on the average number of missing children each year, identified through the NCA reports (which do not go as far back as 2007).

2 A Freedom of Information (FOI) disclosure in 2024 reported that £13, 175, 806 had been spent on Operation Grange, reported for the end of financial year 2023. In 2011, Operation Grange was established and funded by the Home Office to assist in the searches and investigations into Madeleine's disappearance (Metropolitan Police, n.d.).

officers to investigate Madeleine's case. This has been in conjunction with the Portuguese Police. There has been some criticism levied towards the British Police and the disparities experienced by other families in similar situations.

For example, when 21-month-old Ben Needham disappeared in July 1991 from Kos, Greece, the British Police were involved, but not to the extent that they were for Madeleine. Instead, it was only really in 2012 that the British Police engaged in the Kos searches for Ben with the Greek police maintaining overall responsibility. Further, Ben's mum had to petition for support and investments from the English police. She spoke of how challenging this was and frequently cited Madeleine's case during her arguments. She argued that both families should receive the same level of support, given their similarities. From the outside, there are several similarities: they are both British children who disappeared at a very young age in Europe while on holiday with their families.

While there are two plausible explanations for the disparity in the media's coverage of Ben and Madeleine's cases, they cannot necessarily be viewed as isolating factors. Indeed, missing episodes can occur or exist in conjunction with other factors, like victim deservedness, blame attribution and the victim's demographics. The police's response to missing children is also an important determinant in whether the media becomes involved or not. If the police are proactive in searching for the missing child, like they were with Madeleine, then the public and media can quickly catch on to their activities and wait for updates. Suppose the police release an appeal for the missing child and something about the child resonates with the public (e.g., their perceived vulnerability). In that case, the case can be subject to much attention within the media. The police's preoccupation and time investment with a missing child will often indicate how invested the public and media should be.

However, the media reporting of MPs, and children specifically, is not an objective representation of this complex social phenomenon. As with push and pull factors, there can be multiple explanations for a child's disappearance, which is not often sufficiently discussed within the numerous media outlets. There are many more cases, other than just Madeleine, James Bulger and April Jones, that can result in some degree of harm, if not irreparable, fatal harm. Yet not all cases receive the same media coverage. Nevertheless, most MPs are located or return within 24–48 hours, unharmed (e.g., Newiss, 1999; Tarling & Burrows, 2004), so by the time the media may be notified of a missing child, the case is resolved. Furthermore, the reasons for a child's missing episode are widely variable. So the decision to involve the media must be carefully balanced with the consequences of associated media attention,

like embarrassment for the child, or their missing episode being searchable even years later.

The media is only one of the factors influencing our knowledge and understanding of MPs, and specifically, missing children. Yet, it is an important resource in searching for MPs, as well as generating public consciousness of this complex, multifaceted societal problem. However, the focus is mainly on children who are considered inherently vulnerable due to their age; in Madeleine's case, they have not disappeared previously, and their disappearance is considered out of character. Unfortunately, this focus does discriminate against children who have experienced multiple missing episodes, where they are omitted from media coverage more widely.

While MPs span a wide range of contexts, age groups, and media involvement, this book focuses specifically on children who go missing repeatedly. Such cases are often misunderstood and are frequently overlooked in policy and practice. Despite the scale of the problem across England and Wales and the seriousness of the issue, responses are often unsubstantial and fragmented. Multi-agency partnerships, which should be essential for safeguarding and intervention, are notably lacking in coordination and consistency, which does a disservice to RMC and their loved ones.

Why Repeatedly Missing Children Require a New Focus

One of the main arguments and takeaways of this book is that all children are inherently vulnerable owing to their age, maturity and cognitive development (Munro, 2011). Therefore, irrespective of their perceived deservedness by the media, their number of missing episodes or known risks, each missing child cannot just be left unsupervised in the community without some degree of intervention. While missing and without appropriate supervision, children can be exposed to places, spaces and people that may cause them some degree of harm or be otherwise detrimental to them. Examples of this could include substance misuse, witnessing violence or being exposed to criminal activity. It is insufficient to simply conclude that a child will be safe and unharmed if (a) they have intentionally gone missing before, (b) there was no apparent third-party involvement or influence or (c) they were not harmed in their other, earlier, missing episodes. These presumptions, held by multiple agencies, are detrimental to RMC. It is imperative that each episode is unpacked, remaining cognisant that the causes of each missing episode can be fluid, and that some degree of proactive and preventative action is required. Depending on the child's circumstances, the necessary interventions will vary.

Sarah Benford's disappearance is an example of how risk and harm might vary across multiple missing episodes but also demonstrates the need for better working practices and understandings of RMC.

On the 6th of April 2000, 14-year-old Sarah had met with her mum, Vicki, in Kettering town centre. They spent some time together but got into a disagreement and went their separate ways. Later in the day, Sarah called Vicki from Hampden House, a seemingly innocuous block of flats in Kettering. Vicki was unhappy that Sarah was at Hampden House, and this was further exacerbated when it seemed that Sarah was under the influence of something. Despite being concerned, it is unclear when Vicki notified the police or another responsible agency (e.g., the care home, social services). Their subsequent actions for locating and safeguarding Sarah are also unclear. Aged only 14, these risks are concerning and should have resulted in Sarah's missing episode being (a) immediately reported and (b) with a quick and proportionate response by Northamptonshire Police.

At the time of her disappearance, Sarah was living in Welford's Children's Home, under the care of Northamptonshire County Council. Records show that Sarah had been placed in the home for 150 days (before the 6th of April). However, it was also demonstrated that 41 of these days involved Sarah being absent from the children's home. This is nearly 30% of the time where Sarah's whereabouts, activities and safety are unknown, yet the state had corporate parenting responsibilities, and so they should have been addressing these missing episodes. The interventions designed to safeguard Sarah, when she was frequently missing, have not been publicly discussed.

The fact that Sarah was placed in care means she was experiencing significant upheaval and disturbance in her life. Going missing multiple times might have been the result of numerous push and pull factors, like wanting to see her mum or having issues within the children's home where she was living. Although she was still in contact with her mum, the healthiness of that relationship is unknown. Nonetheless, Sarah had multiple vulnerabilities, like using substances and drinking alcohol, all of which increased her risks and harms while missing. Furthermore, it is possible that Sarah began coming to harm over her multiple missing episodes, with concerns raised later that people in the community might have exploited her. While missing, she may have met people, places and spaces that were damaging to her in some way. However, because she had been given the label of a 'repeatedly missing person', the level of risk and harm thought to be experienced by Sarah was minimal. These are just some of the possible reasons why the media did not cover Sarah's missing episodes. Notably, the public was not aware of Sarah's disappearance until the police began treating her disappearance as a murder

inquiry. They never knew to look for her, share online appeals or even knew her name because the public was never privy to her disappearances.

There can be multiple reasons for Sarah's lack of inclusion in the media. Like with Madeleine and Ben, the media might have attributed some degree of victim deservedness to her circumstances. She was living in care at the time of her disappearance, and there has been research indicating that these children are viewed as a waste of police time and resources and not recognised as 'vulnerable' (Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary [HMIC], 2016; Newiss, 1999). Unfortunately, the police's attitudes towards RMC have been highlighted as problematic previously (e.g., Bayliss & Quinton, 2013; Newiss, 1999), which can influence the media's interest in the case and the public's awareness of her missing episodes. Further, unlike Madeleine and Ben, who had no histories of being or going missing previously, Sarah had multiple missing episodes before her seemingly last one. This can also be an important determinant of public and media interest, where it is presumed that she will return of her own accord when ready.

It is important to note that although the media is not the focal point of this book, it is an essential contextual factor in understanding missing children and the discussions surrounding policy, practice and multi-agency responses. It also highlights the disparity in cases, and this can significantly impact the public's understanding of RMC, their needs and how they can be supported, where necessary.

Fast-forwarding to 2021, the police reviewed Sarah's disappearance from April 2000. On nearby land, close to the grounds of the children's home, the police located Sarah's hiding spot: the place where she wanted to keep any items that she did not want the other children in the home seeing. While conducting these searches, the police discovered a firearm, escalating Sarah's disappearance to a murder inquiry. However, the police later released a statement claiming that they had no further lines of inquiry available to progress Sarah's case. Would there have been a different outcome in Sarah's case if the police had taken more notice of her earlier episodes and recognised the vulnerabilities that may have resulted in her going missing multiple times? Would better awareness of her missing episodes and understanding the risks of being unsupervised in the community have allowed Sarah to be effectively safeguarded?

Children like Sarah are the epitome of why this book is needed. It is no longer sufficient to presume that RMC will be fine, are unlikely to experience harm and are problematic and troublesome (e.g., HMIC, 2015). Instead, all RMC need to be suitably incorporated into suitable multi-agency partnerships. Yet, to support children like Sarah, these partnerships need to be