

**Children and young people who go missing:  
pathways through education, social care,  
justice and health.**

**Scoping Report Literature Review**

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# Introduction

Children go missing from diverse family and care contexts. Although many missing episodes are resolved quickly, research has consistently shown that, for some children, going missing is associated with multiple vulnerabilities and increased exposure to harm (Fox et al., 2024; Missing People, 2019). Research has also demonstrated that children become missing under a range of different circumstances and that missing episodes should be understood within the context in which they occur (Biehal & Wade, 2000; Biehal et al., 2003).

For some children, a missing episode may be an indicator of underlying experiences of family conflict, abuse or neglect from which they may be seeking to escape (Hill et al., 2016; Stevenson & Thomas, 2018). Additionally, in some cases, the missing episode itself may increase their exposure to substance misuse, exploitation, criminal involvement and other forms of harm (Branscum & Richards, 2022; Byers et al., 2024). Missing episodes should therefore not be understood in isolation but within the wider context of children's lives, recognising that the factors contributing to children going missing are often closely interconnected with the risks and harms they experience (Boulton et al., 2023; Fox et al., 2024). Beyond the impact on children themselves, their disappearance can also have wider consequences for family members, including emotional, social and practical impacts associated with the uncertainty surrounding their absence (Holmes, 2016). Understanding these relationships is fundamental to developing safeguarding responses that not only reduce repeat missing episodes but also improve children's safety, health and wellbeing, thus promoting better long-term outcomes (Branscum & Richards, 2022).

Over the past 25 years, research has contributed substantially to understanding children who experience missing episodes. Existing studies have examined the characteristics of children who go missing, the vulnerabilities associated with missing episodes, the harms they experience and the support provided to safeguard them (Biehal & Wade, 2000; Biehal et al., 2003; Galiano López et al., 2023; Hutchings et al., 2019; Rees, 2011). More recently, in England, there has been increasing interest in understanding how safeguarding responses, particularly the statutory Return Home Interviews and multi-agency approaches (Department for Education, 2014), may contribute to identifying children's needs, reducing repeat missing episodes and improving children's outcomes (Bagley, 2015; Boulton et al., 2023; Pona et al., 2019).

Research in this field has employed a range of methodological approaches and data sources, including police administrative datasets, multi-agency Missing Children's Team data, Return Home Interview records, Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews, national and practitioner surveys, longitudinal follow-up studies, mixed-methods and qualitative studies, intervention and process evaluations, and scoping and systematic reviews. Together, these sources of evidence provide complementary perspectives on children who go missing by capturing both the scale of missing episodes and children's lived experiences, as well as the responses of safeguarding agencies. While the majority of this evidence originates in England, it is complemented by studies from Wales (Bezeczky & Wilkins, 2022; Hutchings et

al., 2019; Pona et al., 2019), Scotland (McIver & Welch, 2018; Taylor et al., 2014), Australia (Sastre-Gomez et al., 2026; Stevenson & Thomas, 2018), Spain (García-Barceló et al., 2020) and the United States (Branscum & Richards, 2022; Byers et al., 2024; Latzman et al., 2019; Tucker et al., 2011). Differences in welfare systems, legislation and safeguarding practice have been considered when interpreting findings, particularly where statutory guidance or service delivery differs from the current English context.

This narrative literature review examines the characteristics of children who go missing, the vulnerabilities associated with missing episodes, the harms they are exposed to, and the safeguarding responses and interventions developed to support children and reduce repeat missing episodes. By synthesising key evidence across these themes, rather than providing an exhaustive review of the research, the review identifies gaps in the current literature and highlights priorities for future research.

# 1. Children who have missing episodes

## 1.1 Defining children who go missing

In England, the *Statutory Guidance on Children Who Run Away or Go Missing from Home or Care* (Department for Education, 2014) provides the framework for responding to children who experience missing episodes. Throughout the guidance, a child is defined as anyone under the age of 18 years. The guidance distinguishes between children who run away, defined as those who have run away from their home or care placement, or who feel they have been forced or lured to leave; missing children, defined as children reported as missing to the police by their family or carers; and children missing from care, defined as looked after children who are not at their placement or the place they are expected to be (e.g., school) and whose whereabouts are not known. It also recognises situations where looked after children's whereabouts are known, but they are not at their placement or the place they are expected to be, and their carer has concerns or the incident has been notified to the local authority or the police. Despite these distinctions in statutory terminology, this narrative literature review generally uses the terms 'missing episodes' and 'children who go missing', while specifying where relevant whether the evidence derives from police-recorded missing episodes or Return Home Interviews following a reported missing episode, and whether it concerns only children living with their families or in care.

Since 2017, all reported incidents have been classified as missing, replacing the previous distinction between missing and absent (National Crime Agency, 2024). The *Statutory Guidance on Children Who Run Away or Go Missing from Home or Care* (Department for Education, 2014) also outlines the responsibilities of local authorities, the police and partner agencies, including health services, schools and the voluntary sector, and those who care for looked after children, in preventing missing episodes, responding when children go missing, and safeguarding and supporting children following their return.

Once reported, each incident is subject to an initial risk assessment and categorised as presenting no apparent risk, low, medium or high risk, with the level of risk informing the urgency and nature of the safeguarding response (National Crime Agency, 2024). Beyond the statutory definitions, researchers have sought to better understand the different

circumstances in which children become missing and how these may relate to the risks associated with their missing episodes. Biehal and colleagues (2003) described missing episodes as occurring along a continuum ranging from intentional decisions to leave through to situations where children become missing unintentionally or are forced to leave, a broad conceptualisation that continues to underpin contemporary research on missing children. More recently, García-Barceló and colleagues (2020) proposed a classification of missing person cases, distinguishing between “intentional – escape” (including behaviours such as rebelling or leaving with possessions), “intentional – dysfunctional” (ill mental health or being under the influence of drugs/alcohol), “unintentional – accidental/drift” (accidents/missing or avoiding medication or leaving the area) and “unintentional – criminal” (being victimised or offending). Although developed using Spanish police-recorded missing person data involving both adults and children, this classification further illustrates the diverse circumstances in which missing episodes occur. Using UK police data, Halford (2024) found that police risk assessment factors from 4,746 missing person cases could largely be aligned with these established typologies. Focusing on children within police-recorded missing person data, Woolnough and Cunningham (2021) showed that these circumstances varied considerably by age group, with children aged 2–6 years more likely to become missing unintentionally, whereas adolescents aged 12–17 years were more likely to go missing intentionally. Hence, missing children constitute a heterogeneous group whose circumstances, levels of risk and required responses may differ considerably (Biehal et al., 2003; Sidebottom et al., 2020).

Importantly, statutory and professional definitions of missing are not always shared by children themselves. Boulton and colleagues (2023), through analysis of Return Home Interview data, found that only 16% of children explicitly perceived themselves as having been missing, while 40% did not consider themselves to be missing or understand why they had been reported to the police. The authors suggested that this may reflect children’s limited awareness of the risks associated with their circumstances, although it may also indicate differences between children’s own perceptions and the thresholds used by professionals when deciding whether a child should be reported missing.

## 1.2 Who are the children who go missing?

National Crime Agency (2024) data show that in 2023/24 across the UK, of the 304,674 missing person incidents that resulted in police investigations, 65% (196,645) involved children. Moreover, among recorded missing incidents in England and Wales, children aged 12–17 years account for 61% of all reports, a pattern that has remained consistent over recent years. Similar age distributions have been identified across national and international police-recorded data, and national Return Home Interview studies and survey research (e.g., Babuta & Sidebottom, 2018; Boulton et al., 2023; Rees, 2011; Stevenson & Thomas, 2018). Although evidence from these different sources is based on distinct populations and study designs, it consistently identifies adolescence as the developmental period during which children are most frequently reported missing.

Age also appears to shape the pattern of children’s missing behaviour. Evidence suggests that, during adolescence, missing episodes become more frequent and, in some cases, longer in duration. Using Return Home Interview data, Boulton and colleagues (2023) found that increasing age was associated with both the frequency and duration of missing episodes, although the authors noted that these findings should be interpreted cautiously

given the relatively small and non-representative nature of their sample. Similar associations have been reported among children in care, where for every year of age, the odds of missing episodes increased (Branscum & Richards, 2022; Byers et al., 2024). Further evidence from Woolnough and Cunningham (2021), based on police records, showed that children were more likely to be reported missing during adolescence than during early or middle childhood, with the duration of missing episodes also increasing significantly with age. Adolescents remained missing for a median of 21 hours, compared with 4 hours among children aged 7–11 years and 2 hours among those aged 2–6 years.

However, the evidence also indicates that the age at which children first go missing may be equally important. Rees (2011) reported that children who had experienced repeated missing episodes were at least twice as likely to have first gone missing before the age of 13 compared with those who had gone missing only once. Likewise, Stevenson and Thomas (2018) showed that children who experienced repeated missing episodes had first been reported missing at significantly younger ages than those who went missing only once.

National Crime Agency (2024) data indicate that males account for a slightly higher proportion of all recorded missing incidents in England and Wales, the same applies in the subgroup of children. However, findings from research are variable. Several studies included samples comprising a higher proportion of girls than boys (Hill et al., 2016; Rees, 2011; Stevenson & Thomas, 2018), whereas others identified boys as being more likely to experience missing episodes or to be overrepresented among particular groups of children who go missing, including those involved in offending or experiencing serious harm (Byers et al., 2024; Fox et al., 2024). Some of these differences are likely to reflect variations in study populations, the representativeness of individual samples, differences in national and local contexts, the outcomes examined, and variation in the reporting and recording of missing episodes and disclosure of harm (e.g., boys may be less likely to disclose experiences of victimisation) (Fox et al., 2024). Differences may also reflect variation by age group, with Woolnough and Cunningham (2021) finding that boys were more commonly reported missing during early and middle childhood, while girls were more commonly reported missing during adolescence. When it comes to ethnicity, National Crime Agency (2024) data indicate that Black, Black British, Black Welsh, Caribbean or African people, and those from Mixed ethnic groups, are overrepresented among recorded missing person incidents. According to Davis and colleagues (2024) and Hunter and colleagues (2023), in the UK, Black children are considerably overrepresented among children reported missing, accounting for 16% of missing children despite representing around 6% of the wider child population. Using UK local authority data obtained through Freedom of Information requests, Hunter and colleagues (2023) found that children in care who experienced missing episodes were reported missing an average of 6.2 times during 2021–22, compared with 1.9 episodes among children overall. However, frequency varied by ethnicity, with children of Mixed or Multiple ethnicities experiencing the highest average number of episodes (7.7), followed by Black, African Caribbean or Black British children (6.7) and White children (6.3), while the average was lower among Asian or Asian British children (4.1). On the other hand, Boulton and colleagues (2023) found that 64% of Return Home Interview records had missing ethnicity data, limiting opportunities for more detailed analysis. Evidence from the United States has identified a higher risk of missing episodes among African American children in care (Branscum & Richards, 2022). Similarly, using administrative data on children in care from an agency in Kansas, Byers and colleagues (2024) found that the group of children in

care at greatest risk of missing episodes was the most racially diverse of the four profiles identified. The authors argued that this reflects the cumulative effects of complex personal, environmental and systemic disadvantages, including inequities within child welfare and wider social systems, rather than ethnicity alone. Expanding on this, Davis and colleagues (2024), based on interviews and focus groups with Black children, parents and professionals, identified family conflict, feeling unsafe at home, exploitation and difficulties at school as reasons for going missing, consistent with the wider evidence on vulnerabilities discussed in the following section. Importantly, the study also highlighted belonging, identity and acceptance as factors shaping Black children's experiences of going missing, with some participants describing how racism, marginalisation and exclusion within schools, from other professionals and wider society could contribute to feelings of isolation and vulnerability to going missing.

Unaccompanied children are also overrepresented among those who go missing from care (Missing People & The Children's Society, 2024). Using Freedom of Information data from local authorities across the UK, Simon and colleagues (2016) found that 13% of unaccompanied children in care went missing at least once between 2014 and 2015, with more recent similarly collected data also showing 13% in 2024 (Hunter & Durán, 2025). Where demographic data were available, authors noted that the large majority were male, with Albanian and Afghan children representing the largest nationality groups. Findings from the study's survey of professionals also identified asylum and immigration concerns as the highest-rated reason for unaccompanied children going missing (Simon et al., 2016). More recent consultations with professionals similarly highlighted immigration-related fears, but also identified care and relational factors, including poor relationships with carers and professionals, limited information about what would happen to them and dissatisfaction with placements (Missing People & The Children's Society, 2024).

In terms of children's living arrangements, children who experience missing episodes may be living with their families or within the care system. National Crime Agency (2024) data show that, although the majority of children reported missing are missing from home, children in care are disproportionately represented within missing persons data. In England and Wales, children in care account for 19% of all children reported missing (12,363 children), yet they are associated with almost one-third of all missing incidents involving children (32%; 63,665 incidents) (National Crime Agency, 2024). This overrepresentation is consistently reflected across the literature and, in some studies, is even more pronounced. For example, in a national survey of pupils attending 85 secondary schools in England, Rees (2011) found that just over half of the children living in residential care or foster care reported having gone missing at least once, while Boulton and colleagues (2023) reported that 43% of Return Home Interviews related to children in care, despite children in care accounting for less than 1% of the child population in England. Using survey data from four English local authorities, Biehal and Wade (2000) found that going missing was substantially more common among children living in residential care than in foster care, although missing episodes from foster care were likely to be under-recorded.

This overrepresentation should, however, be interpreted with caution. Several authors argued that differences in reporting practices between home and care settings contribute to this pattern, as foster carers and staff in children's homes are generally expected to report children missing in circumstances where parents may not involve the police, for example, when a child leaves their placement without permission or fails to return at an agreed time

despite their whereabouts being known (Babuta & Sidebottom, 2018; Bennett et al., 2024; McIver & Welch, 2018). Reflecting these concerns, Harris (2024), drawing on the views of police officers, reported that some respondents considered that greater responsibility should be taken by families and carers when children go missing, with children's homes and social services perceived as too reliant on the police rather than undertaking initial enquiries themselves. In a consultation with care-experienced children who had previously been missing, Missing People (2021) similarly found that children felt being in care made it more likely that they would be reported missing to the police, and at an earlier stage. Children also shared they did not want the police to be contacted automatically when they were not where expected, instead emphasising that decisions should take account of their individual circumstances and the risks present at the time. On the other hand, when it comes to children living with their families, Hunter and colleagues (2026) highlighted how parental conflict may contribute to missing episodes not being reported to the police. Based on qualitative accounts from young people and professionals, the study identified poor communication between separated parents about a child's whereabouts, differences in how parents responded to missing episodes, and reluctance to involve professionals as possible factors.

Although children living with their families still account for the majority of children reported missing, they have received comparatively less attention within research and practice (Bennett et al., 2024; Hill et al., 2016). Drawing on Return Home Interview data, Hill and colleagues (2016) argued that professionals do not always recognise or respond effectively to the needs of this group, resulting in missed opportunities to identify vulnerabilities and provide appropriate safeguarding support. Despite these differences between home and care settings, Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews analysed by Fox and colleagues (2024) identified examples of missing episodes that had not been reported or formally recorded as missing. These included instances where parents, carers or professionals chose not to report when children had gone missing, as well as a case where the child was recorded by the police as "wanted" rather than "missing", resulting in a different policing response and possibly limiting opportunities for safeguarding.

Children are often described as either missing from home or from care; however, these groups should not be viewed as fixed or mutually exclusive. Fox and colleagues (2024) also found that 58% of cases referred to children who had been reported missing from both home and care at different points in their lives. This finding suggests that children's experiences of going missing may span different living arrangements over time. In fact, some children who repeatedly went missing from home later entered care because of increasing safeguarding concerns, while others went missing from care in attempts to maintain or re-establish relationships with parents, siblings, wider family members or friends (Biehal & Wade, 2000; Byers et al., 2024). Despite this emerging evidence, relatively little is known about how children's missing experiences develop across home and care over time (Bennett et al., 2024). Fox and colleagues (2024) also broadened conceptualisations of missing by recognising that children may also be missing from education, whether through persistent absence, school exclusion or other forms of educational disengagement. This evidence suggests an interconnection between children's experiences across home, care and education, where difficulties in one setting may influence experiences in another.

## 1.3 Characteristics of missing episodes

Missing episodes are not uniform events, as they vary in duration, circumstances and frequency. National evidence demonstrates that most reported missing episodes involving children are resolved relatively quickly. In England and Wales, 83% of missing incidents involving children are resolved within 24 hours, increasing to 92% within 48 hours (National Crime Agency, 2024). Earlier research similarly found that most missing episodes were relatively short, with around three-fifths lasting one day or less, despite just over one in ten lasting a week or longer (Biehal & Wade, 2000). More recently, Boulton and colleagues (2023) identified that missing episodes lasted between one hour and nine days, with an average duration of approximately 22 hours.

Despite most missing episodes being relatively short, the literature suggests that their duration differs across groups of children. Hunter and colleagues (2023), analysing UK police data, found that 20% of incidents involving Black children lasted longer than 48 hours, compared with 14% involving Asian children and 13% involving White children. Differences were also evident among longer episodes, with 4% of incidents involving Black children and 3% involving Asian children lasting more than seven days, compared with 1% involving White children. Using Freedom of Information data from UK local authorities, Simon and colleagues (2016) found that, where duration data were available, 32% of missing incidents involving unaccompanied children lasted more than seven days. Focusing specifically on children in care, Bilsdon and Walley (2023a), through a scoping review of the literature, reported that missing episodes were typically of short duration, with children generally returning quickly following their disappearance. This pattern should, however, be interpreted with caution, as reporting practices differ between home and care settings. As described in a previous section, foster carers and staff in children's homes are generally expected to report children missing in circumstances where parents may not involve the police, possibly influencing the duration of recorded missing episodes. Patterns of duration also appear to differ according to children's missing histories. Babuta and Sidebottom (2018), who analysed police-recorded missing incidents involving children with different living arrangements, found that children reported missing repeatedly tended to remain missing for shorter periods than those reported missing only once, suggesting that the circumstances surrounding repeated missing episodes may differ from those associated with one-off disappearances. By comparison, as noted earlier in this review, Boulton and colleagues (2023), found that increasing age was associated with both longer and more frequent missing episodes.

Analyses of Return Home Interview data show that children rarely travel long distances during missing episodes, instead remaining within familiar environments and social networks. Boulton and colleagues (2023) found that children most commonly reported spending time within their local area (34%), at a friend's house (27%) or visiting family (6%), while only a small proportion travelled outside their local area. Consistent with these findings, Bilsdon and Walley's (2023a) scoping review indicates that children in care tend to be found in expected locations. Boulton and colleagues (2023) also reported that the majority of children spent their time while missing with friends (55%), while others indicated that they had been alone (9%), with family members (6%) or with a boyfriend or girlfriend (6%). It is also important to note that around one in five children did not disclose where they had been or who they had been with whilst missing. Moreover, Boulton and colleagues (2023) identified that missing episodes ended in a variety of ways, with children either

returning independently or being located by the police, family members or carers, most frequently at home or their care placement (35%), followed by their local area (14%), a friend's house (12%) or another family member's house (12%). Hunter and colleagues (2023) noted ethnic differences in how missing episodes were resolved. The proportion of incidents in which children were found by the police was lowest for Black children (16%), compared with Asian (19%) and White children (23%). When it comes to location, O'Brien and colleagues (2023), analysing missing-person cases from two UK police forces, reported that 72% of child cases with available distance data were located within five miles of the location from which they went missing. They also found that greater distances were associated with several indicators of vulnerability, including visual impairment or unspecified disability, family conflict or abuse, drug or alcohol dependency, being subject to a child protection plan, previous harm during a missing episode, or being assessed as at medium or high risk of harm.

Repeated missing episodes are concentrated among a relatively small number of children (Bezeczky & Wilkins, 2022). In the national survey of pupils by Rees (2011), discussed on page 5, 22% had gone missing on more than three occasions. Similarly, Boulton and colleagues (2023) reported that 48% of cases involved children who had experienced more than one missing episode, with one child reported to have gone missing at least 37 times over the previous year. Further illustrating this concentration, Galiano López and colleagues (2023), analysing data from one UK police force, reported that children who were reported missing ten or more times represented only 6% of the children in their sample but accounted for approximately one-third of all missing incidents. Similarly, using data from one UK force, Bilsdon and Walley (2023b) found that the 10% of children with the highest number of missing incidents accounted for 54% of all incidents between 2019 and 2022.

The timing of repeated missing episodes has emerged as important. Sidebottom and colleagues (2020), based on data from one UK police force, reported that over half of first repeat missing episodes occurred within four weeks of an initial recorded missing episode, with a similar pattern observed among children in care and those not in care. Similarly, Galiano López and colleagues (2023) found that almost two-thirds of repeat missing episodes occurred within four weeks of a child's previous return, suggesting that the period immediately following a missing episode may represent a particularly important opportunity for intervention. Bilsdon and Walley (2023b) similarly found that some children experienced intense periods of repeated missing, with the three most frequently missing children in their 2022 sample experiencing periods in which they went missing every few days. Bilsdon and Walley (2023a), in their scoping review of children who go missing from care, further argued that repeated missing episodes may reflect unresolved underlying difficulties, indicating that the circumstances leading to previous missing episodes might not have been adequately addressed, or that discussing issues on return from missing may make children feel uncomfortable. Accounts from children in care similarly suggest that responses following missing episodes should be supportive rather than punitive, with children emphasising the importance of clear boundaries alongside being listened to, treated with respect and responded to with empathy and understanding (Taylor et al., 2014).

Studies have also identified several characteristics associated with repeated missing episodes and, in some cases, with an increased frequency of missing, including younger age at first missing episode, being an adolescent and living in care. Others, including mental health difficulties, family conflict, placement instability, suspected child sexual exploitation,

involvement with youth offending services and substance misuse, are discussed in the following section because they relate more directly to children's vulnerabilities than to the characteristics of missing episodes (Babuta & Sidebottom, 2018; Bezeczky & Wilkins, 2022; Bilsdon & Walley, 2023a; Galiano López et al., 2023; Hutchings et al., 2019; Rees, 2011; Stevenson & Thomas, 2018). Focusing specifically on children with a high frequency of missing episodes, Sidebottom and colleagues (2020) found that children reported missing ten or more times were significantly more likely than those reported missing once to be adolescents, to be in care and to have recorded drug or alcohol dependencies. A child's history of previous missing episodes should therefore form part of the assessment of their circumstances. However, Boulton and colleagues (2023) reported that information on whether the missing episode was a child's first or a repeat episode was unknown or not recorded in 38% of Return Home Interviews. Similar concerns were raised by Hill and colleagues (2016), who suggested that unrecognised repeated missing episodes may reflect wider neglect and missed safeguarding opportunities. This is reinforced by findings from Doyle and Barnes (2020) and Fox and colleagues (2024), who identified repeated missing episodes as significant predictors of harm.

## 2. Vulnerabilities and risk factors associated with missing episodes

### 2.1 Individual vulnerabilities

Children who experience missing episodes often present vulnerabilities across multiple areas of their lives. These vulnerabilities extend beyond the missing episode itself and can encompass children's health and education. While health and educational vulnerabilities are discussed individually in this section, later sections explore how they interact with one another and with wider contextual vulnerabilities, reflecting the complex circumstances within which children experience missing episodes.

Health-related vulnerabilities are consistently identified among children who experience missing episodes. Several studies have reported high levels of emotional, behavioural, and mental health difficulties, including depression, self-harm and suicidal ideation, among children who go missing (Boulton et al., 2023; Branscum & Richards, 2022; Byers et al., 2024; Hill et al., 2016; Missing People, 2019; Stevenson & Thomas, 2018). For example, Boulton and colleagues (2023) found that one in three children participating in Return Home Interviews had behavioural difficulties and one in five had mental health difficulties. However, these proportions should be interpreted with caution, as between 54% and 97% of information relating to children's previous vulnerabilities was recorded as "unknown", "not asked" or "not stated" within the Return Home Interviews. Fox and colleagues (2024) reported that health issues were identified in the majority of Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews involving children who experienced serious harm following missing episodes, with mental health difficulties identified in 10 of the 12 cases. Ethnic differences were identified in the recording of mental health vulnerabilities. Using police data, Hunter and colleagues (2023) reported that 9% of incidents involving White children had a mental health risk marker, compared with 4% involving Asian children and 1% involving Black children. However, it was unclear whether these differences reflected variation in the prevalence of mental health difficulties or differences in their identification, reporting and recording; the

authors suggested that mental health vulnerabilities may be less readily identified among Black and Asian children who go missing. Research focusing specifically on children in care likewise identified behavioural and mental health difficulties as important characteristics associated with an increased likelihood of missing episodes (Branscum & Richards, 2022; Byers et al., 2024). Evidence also suggests that children who have disabilities are disproportionately represented among those who experience missing episodes and may be particularly vulnerable to harm while missing. Rees (2011), through a national survey of pupils, reported higher rates of missing episodes among children who had a disability, while Doyle and Barnes (2020), using data from two police forces, identified disability as a significant predictor of harm following missing episodes.

Neurodivergence and special educational needs have also been identified among children who experience missing episodes. Using UK police data, Reilly and colleagues (2021) identified autism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) among the at-risk categories used in missing-person investigations. Similarly, Fox and colleagues (2024) found that in half of the Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews, children had special educational needs, most commonly autism or ADHD, indicating the prominence of these needs among children who experienced the most severe outcomes following missing episodes. Davis and colleagues (2024), based on qualitative accounts from Black children and young people, parents and professionals, also raised concerns about how neurodiversity is recognised among Black children who go missing. Some parents described their children's neurodiversity, including autism, as not always being recognised as an indicator of vulnerability or adequately considered in safeguarding responses.

Educational vulnerabilities are consistently identified among children who have missing episodes. Across the literature, children who go missing frequently experience poor school attendance, school exclusion and broader difficulties engaging with education (Biehal & Wade, 2000; Fox et al., 2024; Hill et al., 2016; Missing People, 2019; Rees, 2011; Tucker et al., 2011). Rees (2011) found higher than average missing episodes amongst children who have learning difficulties and reported that more than half of children who have had a missing episode in the previous year held negative views about school, while Hill and colleagues (2016) reported that problems at school were among the most commonly identified needs of children following missing episodes. Furthermore, Doyle and Barnes (2020) identified learning difficulties as a significant predictor of harm following missing episodes.

Recent research has broadened understanding of educational vulnerabilities by recognising that children who have missing episodes may also be missing from education. Missing People (2019) reported that over half of the children participating in Return Home Interviews had experienced truancy, poor school attendance or school exclusion. Fox and colleagues (2024) found that all 12 cases involving children who experienced missing episodes from home or care and serious harm were also missing from education, with school exclusion identified in 75% of these cases.

## 2.2 Contextual vulnerabilities

Children's missing episodes are shaped by the wider contexts in which they live. The literature commonly conceptualises these influences as push and pull factors (Babuta & Sidebottom, 2018; Hutchings et al., 2019). Push factors refer to adverse experiences that

encourage children to leave their home or care environment, whereas pull factors describe the relationships, places or experiences that attract them away or encourage them to remain away. While this distinction provides a useful framework for understanding children's missing episodes, contextual vulnerabilities are dynamic and may operate differently according to children's individual circumstances. For example, family relationships may act as a push factor when characterised by conflict, abuse or neglect, but later become a pull factor when children living in care seek to maintain relationships with parents, siblings or other family members (Biehal & Wade, 2000; Byers et al., 2024).

Family-related difficulties are among the most consistently identified push factors associated with children's missing episodes (Boulton et al., 2023; Hill et al., 2016; Hunter et al., 2026; Rees, 2011). Rees (2011), through a national survey of pupils, found that children living in low-warmth, high-conflict family environments were substantially more likely to report having gone missing, with recent changes in family composition also associated with increased rates of missing episodes. Extending this understanding, analysis of Return Home Interview data by Hill and colleagues (2016) identified parental difficulties in managing children's behaviour and wider family stress, including parental mental health difficulties, disability and bereavement, as prominent vulnerabilities surrounding children's missing episodes. Similarly, Boulton and colleagues (2023), through analysis of Return Home Interviews, reported that children most commonly attributed their missing episodes to problems at home, including arguments with parents or carers. Hunter and colleagues (2026) highlighted challenges in distinguishing parental conflict from domestic abuse. Drawing on professionals' accounts, the authors noted instances where parental conflict had escalated into abuse or where limited information made it difficult to establish the nature of the difficulties within the family.

For children in care, characteristics of their placements and wider care experiences may also shape missing episodes. Drawing on interviews with children in foster care and residential care, Biehal and Wade (2000) found that some children struggled to adjust to the expectations and boundaries of foster care, while children in residential care described placement related reasons for going missing, including bullying and difficulties with other children. Missing People (2021), based on consultations with care-experienced children who had previously been missing, identified unhappiness with placements, placement rules and restrictions, and wanting greater freedom or time alone as reasons that could make children go missing. Some children also described wanting to see family and friends, particularly where restrictions associated with being in care made maintaining these relationships more difficult, but also identified exploitation and drug or alcohol use as potential reasons for going missing. Additionally, Branscum and Richards (2022), using national U.S. administrative data on children in care, identified several indicators of placement instability associated with missing episodes, including shorter duration in the current placement, a greater number of placements and multiple entries into care following removal from their birth family. Using administrative data on children in care from an agency in Kansas, Byers and colleagues (2024) reported that limited family connections characterised children at greatest risk of going missing. Their interviews with children suggested that children with few family connections, limited access to supportive relationships or disrupted family relationships often described having fewer emotional and practical resources to draw upon, greater instability and little incentive to remain in care when faced with challenges within their placements. Some children also described making decisions to leave in response to harsh placement

restrictions, lack of support and other challenges that undermined their sense of belonging within care, including experiences of overt and covert racism.

Importantly, Biehal and Wade (2000) distinguished between the immediate and underlying reasons associated with missing episodes. Immediate reasons often included arguments with parents or carers, disagreements over placement rules, bullying or conflicts within care settings. However, these events rarely occurred in isolation. Instead, they were frequently embedded within broader histories of neglect, abuse, family conflict, rejection, disrupted attachments and placement instability.

Family and social relationships are among the most consistently identified pull factors associated with children's missing episodes. For many children living in care, maintaining relationships with parents, siblings, wider family members and friends provides a strong motivation for leaving placements. Biehal and Wade (2000) found that many children, particularly those in foster care, went missing because they felt distressed by family separation, while others experienced conflicting loyalties between their birth families and foster carers. Similarly, Byers and colleagues (2024) identified limited family connections as a common characteristic of children at greatest risk of going missing, with many children describing leaving care to reconnect with supportive family members or other significant relationships. Boulton and colleagues (2023) likewise reported that wanting to see friends or family was among the most commonly reported reasons for going missing, with some children identifying being placed away from their families and friends as contributing to their decision to leave care.

For other children, pull factors extended beyond supportive relationships to include wider peer and social environments. Boulton and colleagues (2023) found that prior to missing episodes, 41% of children disclosed involvement in criminal activity, 32% reported drug use and 17% described associations with older peers. Additionally, in a 10-year follow-up study using police data in Australia, Stevenson and Thomas (2018) found that engagement in criminal activity and drug use prior to a missing episode were significantly associated with repeated missing episodes. Using police missing-person records, Shalev (2011) examined children who had been reported missing three or more times within one year and found substantial involvement with the criminal justice system, although the timing of this involvement in relation to individual missing episodes was unclear. Of these children, 86% had been arrested at least once, with half having been arrested on six or more occasions. The most common arrests involved assault and grievous bodily harm, criminal damage, theft and shoplifting. Drawing on Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews involving children who experienced serious harm, Fox and colleagues (2024) found that drugs or alcohol were identified as a vulnerability in 92% of cases, while prior victimisation or adverse childhood experiences were identified in 58%. The authors noted that drug-related concerns could relate to either the child or a parent and included misuse, possession in circumstances suggesting supply, and overdose.

## 2.3 Interactions between vulnerabilities

Research increasingly demonstrates that children who experience missing episodes rarely present with a single vulnerability or risk factor. Rather, individual vulnerabilities and contextual influences frequently coexist, creating complex pathways into missing episodes. For instance, Hunter and colleagues (2026), using survey and qualitative data from young

people and professionals, found that professionals viewed parental conflict as interacting with other factors. Unresolved parental conflict was also recognised as potentially contributing to longer and repeated missing episodes and increased vulnerability to poor mental health and exploitation. Accounts from young people and professionals suggested that difficulties at home may lead children to seek support, belonging or comfort elsewhere, potentially increasing their vulnerability to unsafe relationships. Research further suggests that children's vulnerabilities cluster in different ways across groups of children rather than forming a single profile of risk. Using latent class analysis of administrative data on children in care from an agency in Kansas, Byers and colleagues (2024) identified four distinct profiles of children in care, showing that those at greatest risk of missing episodes were characterised by multisystem involvement (i.e., child welfare and juvenile justice), limited family connections, substance use and mental health difficulties. As stated in a previous section, this group was also the most ethnically diverse of the four profiles. Furthermore, Doyle and Barnes (2020), using police data, found that vulnerabilities associated with harm differed by gender. Among girls, mental illness, learning disability, hearing impairment, child sexual exploitation risk, suicidal ideation, being in care and repeated missing episodes were significant predictors of harm, whereas among boys, being in care was the only statistically significant predictor.

The interaction between vulnerabilities also extends to children's educational experiences and wider safeguarding context. Evidence from a study of prolific young robbery offenders illustrates how missing episodes can co-occur with wider vulnerabilities. In detail, using police data, Hilder and colleagues (2021) found that 63% of the overall sample had previously been reported missing, while 49% had experienced school exclusion, 91% were known to children's social services and 80% had previously been victims of crime. The Youth Endowment Fund (2025) found that children in the UK who completed the survey and reported being missing from home at least monthly experienced vulnerabilities across several areas of their lives. For instance, 52% were persistently absent from school, 34% had been excluded or suspended, 48% had received special educational needs support, 58% had interacted with the police over a suspected offence, 58% reported high-risk peers and 43% had been supported by a social worker. Among children who had experienced serious harm, Fox and colleagues (2024) reported that vulnerabilities relating to behavioural concerns, police involvement and crime, involvement with children's social services and missing from school were identified in all Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews of children who had experienced missing episodes from home or care. Focusing specifically on children in care, using survey data provided by social workers, foster carers and staff from children's homes, Biehal and Wade (2000) noted that children who experienced repeated missing episodes were less likely to attend school and more likely to have histories of offending and substance misuse. Children with emotional and behavioural difficulties were also particularly likely to experience school exclusion, involvement in offending and repeated missing episodes.

## 2.4 Protective factors

Compared with the extensive literature examining vulnerabilities and risk factors associated with missing episodes, relatively little attention has been given to factors that may protect children from going missing or reduce the likelihood of repeated missing episodes.

Drawing on multi-agency data involving children reported missing from home or care, Hutchings and colleagues (2019) identified positive family relationships and school engagement as potentially important protective factors. Focusing specifically on children in care, Byers and colleagues (2024), using administrative data from an agency in Kansas, found that children who experienced greater environmental stability, including fewer placement moves, placement with siblings, where appropriate, placement in their preferred school, and fewer behavioural or health difficulties, were least likely to experience missing episodes. The authors also identified family connections as an important protective factor through both administrative data and children's own accounts, with some children describing returning to care because they wished to reduce the impact of their absence on people they cared about. Their qualitative findings further suggested that supportive care environments extending beyond children's basic needs, and promoting a sense of belonging, stability and normality, may reduce children's decisions to leave care placements. Similarly, Biehal and Wade (2000) based on survey and qualitative data, argued that stable placements in which children are able to develop secure attachments are fundamental to reducing repeated missing episodes. They also observed that children's homes characterised by strong leadership, clear purpose and staff who were motivated to negotiate boundaries with children appeared better able to prevent children from becoming increasingly detached and repeatedly going missing. Taylor and colleagues (2014), according to perspectives of children in care, also recognised relational environments as a protective factor, namely supportive relationships, family contact, clear boundaries and structure, while also highlighting the importance of children being listened to, treated with respect and supported in their agency. Moreover, Biehal and Wade (2000) stressed the importance of timely intervention when children first begin to go missing.

Evaluations of Return Home Interviews emphasised the relevance of trusting relationships with practitioners, effective collaboration between agencies and sustained one-to-one support in helping children address the reasons underlying their missing episodes and supporting efforts to prevent further episodes (Bagley, 2015; Pona et al., 2019). Bagley's (2015) evaluation also found that children commonly described receiving support from multiple sources, including parents and other agencies, alongside the support provided by project partner services. More recently, Fox and colleagues (2024), through analysis of Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews, argued that repeated missing episodes, poor school attendance and children's contact with multiple agencies present important opportunities for safeguarding, reinforcing the value of recognising concerns early and responding before children's vulnerabilities escalate.

Although the evidence base remains limited, the available literature suggests that protective factors extend beyond the absence of vulnerability. Rather, stable relationships, positive family connections, supportive care environments that foster belonging and stability, engagement with education and timely professional support appear to play an important role in reducing children's likelihood of experiencing missing episodes.

## 3. Harms experienced by children who have missing episodes

### 3.1 Not all missing episodes result in harm

Children who experience missing episodes are at increased risk of harm, however, not all missing episodes result in immediate adverse outcomes. Some children go missing to spend time with family or friends (Biehal & Wade, 2000; Boulton et al., 2023). In addition, children living in care may be reported missing after remaining away longer than expected or failing to return by an agreed curfew time, despite often presenting little immediate risk and their whereabouts being known (McIver & Welch, 2018). Similarly, Doyle and Barnes (2020), using police data, found that many children initially classified by the police as being at medium or high risk experienced no subsequent harm, whereas a substantial proportion of those who did experience harm had not been identified as high risk.

The absence of immediate harm should, however, not be interpreted as the absence of safeguarding concerns. Children who experience missing episodes often present with multiple individual and contextual vulnerabilities before going missing, while harmful experiences may remain undisclosed, unidentified or unsupported following their return (Boulton et al., 2023; Fox et al., 2024). Moreover, as mentioned in a previous section, children's own understanding of their missing episode may differ from that of professionals, with many not recognising themselves as having been missing or understanding why they had been reported to the police (Boulton et al., 2023). Consequently, even where no immediate harm is identified, missing episodes represent an important opportunity to listen to children's experiences, recognise unmet needs and provide timely safeguarding support.

### 3.2 Harm and exploitation

Police data indicate that only 4% of missing people reported suffering harm whilst missing (National Crime Agency, 2024). However, these figures should be interpreted with caution, as police forces across the UK use different recording systems and reporting procedures, resulting in variation in the completeness and standardisation of the national data (National Crime Agency, 2024; Sidebottom & Davies, 2025). Evidence from research focusing on children's experiences, however, suggests that experiencing harm may be more common. Evidence from a national survey of pupils found that around one in nine children reported having been hurt or harmed whilst away from home (Rees, 2011). Using police data, Doyle and Barnes (2020) identified repeated missing episodes and being in care as significant predictors of harm among children reported missing. Immediate harm can take many forms, including victimisation, such as child sexual exploitation (CSE) and child criminal exploitation (CCE), offending and substance use. Rather than occurring in isolation, these forms of immediate harm frequently overlap and may occur simultaneously, reflecting the complex circumstances surrounding missing episodes (Fox et al., 2024; Stevenson & Thomas, 2018). Fox and colleagues (2024) argued that research often focuses on specific types of missing episodes or individual forms of harm, meaning that the full range of harm experienced by children who go missing may not always be recognised. They further argued, as stated in a previous section, that in practice harmful experiences may not always be disclosed, or disclosure may be delayed, contributing to the under-recognition of harm experienced whilst missing.

Victimisation is a form of immediate harm experienced by some children who go missing (Biehal & Wade, 2000; Biehal et al., 2003; Youth Endowment Fund, 2025). This may include physical assault, sexual assault, abuse and other forms of violence experienced during or following a missing episode. Drawing on survey accounts from young people with a history of missing episodes, Biehal and colleagues (2003) found that 54% had experienced at least one of four risks while missing, with over two-fifths reporting sleeping rough, almost one-third staying with a stranger, one in eight being physically hurt and one in nine being sexually assaulted. Beyond these broader experiences of risk, harm and victimisation, CSE and CCE tend to be consistently identified among children who experience missing episodes, with previous missing episodes recognised as increasing the risk of both (Bilsdon & Walley, 2023a). The Youth Endowment Fund (2025), according to findings from a survey completed by children, found that among those who reported being missing from home at least monthly, 26% reported criminal exploitation and 20% identified as having been in a 'gang' during the previous year. Using Return Home Interview data, Missing People (2019) noted that 14% of children were currently experiencing CSE or had experienced it in the past, while 43% disclosed one or more indicators associated with CSE or another form of exploitation, highlighting that concerns relating to exploitation can emerge following a missing episode, even where exploitation has not been formally identified. Focusing on the ethnicity of children, differences emerged in the recording of exploitation. Hunter and colleagues (2023) reported that CSE risk markers in police data were recorded in 14% of incidents involving White children, compared with 8% involving both Black and Asian children. In local authority data, CSE markers were recorded in 15% of incidents involving White and Asian children and 11% involving Black children. For CCE, police data showed markers in 17% of incidents involving White children, compared with 11% involving Black children and 10% involving Asian children, while local authority data showed the opposite pattern, with higher proportions among Black (25%) and Asian children (20%) than White children (17%). The authors noted that these differences may reflect variation in the identification and recording of exploitation rather than its prevalence alone. Among children in care who went missing in medium- or low-risk incidents, 19% were currently experiencing or had previously experienced CSE, while 13% were currently experiencing or had previously experienced CCE or another form of exploitation. Sastre-Gomez and colleagues (2026), analysing administrative data from residential care in Australia, identified substantial overlap between CSE and CCE concerns, alongside increasing missing duration across CSE, CCE and combined exploitation profiles. However, this increase occurred alongside a decline in recorded care incidents, which the authors suggested may reflect reduced opportunities to observe and document harm while children are missing rather than a reduction in harm itself. The findings suggest that repeated missing episodes may form part of trajectories of exploitation-related vulnerability and cumulative harm. Drawing on Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews, Fox and colleagues (2024) identified multiple forms of serious harm among children who experienced missing episodes from home or care, including abuse, neglect, exploitation and death. Exploitation, including CSE and CCE, was identified in 92% of cases, while half of the cases documented all four harm types examined and three-quarters involved death, attempted death or near-fatal incidents. The relationship between missing episodes and exploitation may also be bidirectional, with exploitation contributing to children going missing while missing episodes may themselves increase children's exposure to exploitation (Sharp-Jeffs, 2016).

Using administrative data from the Florida child welfare system, Latzman and colleagues (2019) found that human trafficking allegations were recorded for 7% of children who experienced missing episodes from care. Trafficking allegations were associated with repeated missing episodes, with children for whom allegations were recorded having a median of 16 episodes compared with three among those without. More than one-third had experienced at least 10 previous missing episodes before the episode in which a trafficking allegation was recorded. Missing episodes involving trafficking allegations were also longer, with a median duration of nine days compared with two days for episodes without such allegations. Children for whom trafficking allegations were recorded were also more likely to be female, to have first gone missing from care at a younger age, and to have histories of physical, psychological and sexual abuse and a greater number of care placements. Recent UK evidence similarly highlights the substantial overlap between trafficking and missing from care. Using Freedom of Information data from local authorities across the UK, Hunter and Durán (2025) found that 37% of children identified or suspected as trafficked went missing from care in 2024. Among trafficked children who went missing, an average of 12 missing incidents per child was recorded.

Bilsdon and Walley (2023b), by analysing police data, found that 8 of the 20 most frequently missing children were recorded as being involved in County Lines activity. These children were also described as being at risk of exploitation and as having records relating to substance misuse and criminality. Using Return Home Interview data, Boulton and colleagues (2023) found that 22% of children engaged in criminal activity during their missing episode, most commonly relating to drug consumption, drug running and drug selling. Drawing on qualitative data from children in care and the professionals and carers supporting them, Biehal and Wade (2000) found that some children went missing from residential care with the intention of offending, while for others offending occurred opportunistically during missing episodes. Additionally, in a 10-year follow-up study using police data in Australia, Stevenson and Thomas (2018) identified a significant association between repeat missing episodes and drug use whilst missing. Missing People (2019) reported that 35% of children in care disclosed alcohol misuse in Return Home Interviews following medium or low risk missing episodes.

### 3.3 Long-term harm

Immediate harms associated with missing episodes have received increasing attention, yet far less is known about their longer-term consequences, since much of the evidence on children with missing episodes is cross-sectional (Sastre-Gomez et al., 2026; Tucker et al., 2011). The available evidence suggests that some children experience harms that extend beyond the missing episode itself, particularly where missing episodes are repeated (Bilsdon & Walley, 2023a).

In a 10-year follow-up study using Australian police data involving young people aged under 25 years, Stevenson and Thomas (2018) found that 65% of the young people first reported missing as children had accumulated an offending history, while 68% a victimisation history. Repeated missing episodes were also associated with an increased likelihood of adverse criminal justice and mental health-related outcomes compared with single missing episodes. Similarly, longitudinal evidence from the United States suggests that missing episodes during adolescence may be associated with adverse outcomes extending into young adulthood. Tucker and colleagues (2011), using repeated survey data from adolescents in

South Dakota followed from Grade 9 to age 21, found that those who had a history of missing episodes subsequently had greater drug dependence and depressive symptoms at age 21, even after accounting for earlier substance use, depression and other antecedent vulnerabilities.

## 4. Safeguarding responses to children who experience missing episodes

### 4.1 Statutory safeguarding response

In England, the *Statutory Guidance on Children who Run Away or Go Missing from Home or Care* (Department for Education, 2014) provides the framework for safeguarding children who experience missing episodes. When a child is reported missing, an initial risk assessment is undertaken to determine the level of police intervention and the safeguarding response required, nonetheless not all reports of missing episodes progress to formal missing person investigations, as some children return of their own accord or are located quickly (National Crime Agency, 2024). The Department for Education (2014) states that local authorities and the police should work together to assess risk and coordinate safeguarding through local Runaway and Missing from Home and Care protocols. The College of Policing (2026) emphasises that risk assessment is a dynamic process, requiring consideration of the child's individual circumstances, vulnerabilities and indicators of harm, with police responses proportionate to the assessed level of risk. However, as mentioned in a previous section, research has questioned the accuracy of existing police risk assessment processes. Doyle and Barnes (2020), using police data, found that risk assessments based primarily on professional judgement frequently failed to distinguish between children who subsequently experienced harm and those who did not, highlighting limitations in predicting future harm. However, Chatzisyneonidis and colleagues (2025) cautioned that the absence of subsequent harm among those classified as high risk may partly reflect increased police and safeguarding responses triggered by the classification. However, drawing on Return Home Interview data, Missing People (2019) reported that serious harm and ongoing risks were not confined to children assessed as high risk, with safeguarding concerns frequently disclosed by children initially assessed as medium or low risk following their return. Similarly, Fox and colleagues (2024), through analysis of Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews, stressed that some missing incidents were not treated as high risk despite the same children being perceived by those responsible for their care or safeguarding as too risky to supervise, with concerns including self-harm, sexualised behaviour, carrying weapons and involvement with dangerous individuals. Moreover, Davis and colleagues (2024), based on the experiences of Black children, parents and professionals, found that some participants described Black children as being stereotyped, adultified and criminalised, which they described as children being perceived as less vulnerable and with risks such as mental health difficulties and exploitation being under-identified.

Recent research has begun to develop and validate statistical models for predicting harm in missing person investigations. Using data from two UK police forces, Sidebottom and Davies (2025) developed and validated a statistical prediction model and subsequently examined predictors of harm across different age groups, including children aged 17 years and under. The findings suggested that predictors of harm vary according to age group and that

validated statistical models may complement professional judgement in police risk assessment. Using Smallest Space Analysis, a form of multidimensional scaling, Halford (2024) analysed missing person cases from a UK police force to examine how police risk assessment factors aligned within established missing person typologies (i.e., intentional–escape, intentional–dysfunctional, unintentional–accidental/drift and unintentional–criminal) and how these typologies differed across case outcomes and risk gradings. The findings suggested that identifying these typologies, alongside predictors of harm, may provide an additional aid to police risk grading and decision-making. The quality of police risk assessment may also be constrained by limitations in the information recorded about children’s circumstances. For instance, Bennett and colleagues’ (2024) scoping review found that some studies did not distinguish between children’s different home environments (living with parents or guardians, kinship care, foster care or residential care).

In practice, police forces and safeguarding partnerships are increasingly using the Philomena Protocol (National Police Chief’s Council, 2023) to strengthen the response to children who are at risk of going missing, particularly those in care. The protocol involves the completion of a standardised, pre-prepared record containing key information about the child, including places they may frequent, significant relationships, vulnerabilities and a recent photograph. This information can be shared immediately with the police if the child goes missing, reducing delays in the early stages of the investigation and supporting a timelier safeguarding response. The College of Policing (2026) further recommends that, for children in care, the Philomena Protocol accompanies them when they move placements and is updated regularly to reflect changes in risk and safeguarding information. However, despite the Philomena Protocol being recognised as a potentially valuable approach (Bilsdon & Walley, 2023b), evidence regarding its effectiveness remains absent, with Bennett and colleagues’ (2024) scoping review identifying no studies examining its implementation or effectiveness in preventing missing episodes, reducing harm or supporting timely return, while Chatzisymeonidis and colleagues (2025), through Freedom of Information requests seeking evidence on approaches used in missing-person investigations, found that no responding police force provided relevant evidence concerning the Philomena Protocol.

The statutory guidance also recognises the risks to children’s safety and welfare associated with missing episodes and emphasises the importance of how professionals engage with children following their return (Department for Education, 2014). This reflects a broader shift towards understanding children who go missing as children in need of safeguarding and support, rather than as responsible for their behaviour (Bilsdon & Walley, 2023a). However, earlier research suggests that this approach has not always been reflected in children’s experiences of police responses. In consultations with care-experienced children who had previously been missing, Missing People (2021) found mixed views about police involvement. Some children described negative experiences and frustration, while others recognised that police involvement could be positive and necessary. Children’s views were influenced by how officers treated them, with greater understanding from police considered important. Also drawing on children’s accounts, Beckett and colleagues (2015) found that some felt police focused on their behaviour rather than recognising their vulnerability or the circumstances contributing to the missing episode. Negative experiences of police contact and limited trust can hinder children’s engagement with the police and opportunities to disclose safeguarding concerns (Beckett et al., 2015; Harris & Shalev Greene, 2016; McIver & Welch, 2018). Reflecting these concerns, Fox and colleagues (2024) argued that effective

police risk assessment requires proactive information gathering, a child-centred rather than single-incident approach and earlier intervention, which may improve safeguarding responses and reduce the likelihood of harm escalating.

Safeguarding children who go missing must also be considered within the wider context of contemporary police demand. Vulnerability and safeguarding concerns account for a substantial proportion of contemporary policing activity (Boulton et al., 2017). In fact, Home Office (2026a) data indicate that missing person incidents represented the single largest demand on police public safety and welfare time, accounting for 16% of activity. Missing episodes have also been identified as among the most common and costly non-crime demands placed on police services, often stretching available resources (Babuta & Sidebottom, 2018; Bilsdon & Walley, 2023a; Fox et al., 2024). The scale of this demand is also reflected in the costs associated with investigating missing incidents. For comparison, the Home Office (2026b) estimated that investigating an assault resulting in injury costs approximately £1,270 per offence, while investigating a dwelling burglary costs around £510 per offence. In contrast, Shalev Greene and Pakes (2014) estimated that investigating a medium-risk, medium-term missing person case costs between £1,325 and £2,416. More recently, Halford (2024) estimated that, when adjusted for inflation, these costs would equate to approximately £1,743–£3,177 per missing person investigation, representing an increase of around 31% from the original estimates.

Once a child has been found, the statutory guidance sets out further safeguarding measures through Safe and Well checks and Independent Return Home Interviews (Department for Education, 2014). Safe and Well checks are undertaken by the police as soon as possible after a child is found and focus on the child's immediate welfare by checking for any indications of harm, establishing where and with whom they have been, and providing an opportunity to disclose any offending by or against them. They are distinct from independent Return Home Interviews, which local authorities are responsible for ensuring are offered within 72 hours of the child's return. These interviews are normally carried out by an independent person who is not involved in the child's care and who is trained to follow up any actions that arise. In practice, they may be delivered by a local authority team or a commissioned partner agency (Boulton et al., 2023). Return Home Interviews aim to identify and address harm that may not have been disclosed during the Safe and Well check, understand the reasons for the missing episode, identify ongoing risks, and inform the support and safeguarding measures needed to reduce the likelihood of future missing episodes (Department for Education, 2014).

Although Safe and Well checks form a key component of the statutory safeguarding response (Department for Education, 2014), there is currently little empirical research evaluating their effectiveness (Bennett et al., 2024; Chatzisyneonidis et al., 2025). The limited available evidence suggests that their practice varies across police forces (Harris, 2019), with inspection evidence highlighting inconsistencies in their implementation and emphasising the importance of a supportive, child-centred approach to encouraging children's engagement and disclosure (Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary, 2016). More recently, a scoping review by Chatzisyneonidis and colleagues (2025) found that the outcomes of Safe and Well checks remain unexplored, with no evidence identified regarding the mechanisms or contextual factors associated with their use. This scoping review also highlighted implementation concerns, including inadequate information sharing and the

limited use of information obtained through these Safe and Well checks to inform subsequent case planning.

In contrast, most research has focused on Return Home Interviews and broader safeguarding responses (Bilsdon & Walley, 2023a), with the latter discussed in the following sections. The need for a follow-up after a missing episode has long been recognised (Biehal et al., 2003). The available evidence suggests that Return Home Interviews can provide an important opportunity for early safeguarding and intervention by identifying concerns that may not have been recognised during the initial police response, facilitating access to appropriate support and enhancing information-sharing with children's services and the police (Hill et al., 2016; Missing People, 2019). However, their contribution appears to depend on the quality of professional engagement and whether the information obtained informs subsequent safeguarding action, including effective follow-up support, appropriate referral pathways and ongoing monitoring (Bagley, 2015; Hill et al., 2016; Missing People, 2019; Pona et al., 2019).

Missing People (2019) found that children initially assessed as medium or low risk frequently disclosed mental health concerns, school-related difficulties, exploitation, offending and substance misuse. Similarly, Hill and colleagues (2016) reported that Return Home Interviews highlighted concerns relating to children's emotional health, difficulties experienced by parents in managing children's behaviour and family stress. Boulton and colleagues (2023) also found that Return Home Interviews frequently revealed children's behavioural difficulties, conflict at home, substance misuse and previous involvement with children's services. Beyond their role in identifying children's wider safeguarding needs, how Return Home Interviews are delivered also appears important. Pona and colleagues (2019) argued that Return Home Interviews should be viewed as one element within a continuum of interrelated safeguarding actions rather than an isolated, box-ticking exercise. They further highlighted the importance of trusted relationships, non-judgemental communication and an informal interviewing style that encourages children to disclose their experiences. The importance of trust may be particularly relevant for Black children. Davis and colleagues (2024) found that some Black children described mistrust of the police and reluctance to seek their help, including perceptions that concerns would not be prioritised or taken seriously. Parents similarly described mistrust of services developing through repeated attempts to obtain support and experiences of feeling let down. The authors highlighted Return Home Interviews as an opportunity for children to be listened to in an open and non-judgemental environment, including exploring experiences of racism where relevant. Consistent with this, Boulton and colleagues (2023) observed that where children were interviewed on more than one occasion, the interview was generally conducted by the same organisation, potentially supporting continuity of professional relationships.

However, evidence also highlights challenges in the delivery of Return Home Interviews. Boulton and colleagues (2023) found that fewer than half of the interviews took place within the recommended 72-hour timeframe, and substantial amounts of information were recorded as "unknown", "not asked" or "not stated", including information about where children had been and who they had been with. These gaps can limit opportunities to identify children's experiences, vulnerabilities and safeguarding needs, as well as the extent to which Return Home Interviews could inform future safeguarding or policing interventions. The authors also noted that there was no standardised template for Return Home Interviews, with considerable variation in the forms used by local authorities and commissioned partner

agencies, potentially contributing to inconsistencies in the type and quality of information recorded. Hill and colleagues (2016) found that although contact with children was usually established within the statutory timeframe, interviews were not always completed within 72 hours because practitioners prioritised approaches that encouraged children's engagement, including allowing them to choose the interview location or interviewer. This finding highlights the tension between delivering Return Home Interviews within the statutory timeframe and adopting flexible, child-centred approaches that maximise children's engagement and opportunities for meaningful disclosure. Pona and colleagues (2019), in their evaluation of the Return Home Interview process, identified practical challenges affecting delivery of the interviews, these included delays in referrals and notifications, difficulties completing interviews where children went missing repeatedly, and refusals by children or parents to participate. Fox and colleagues (2024) similarly identified inconsistencies in the delivery of Return Home Interviews, noting that interviews were not always undertaken, including where offers were declined or where police did not share missing incidents with local authorities. The authors also noted limitations in how information obtained through Return Home Interviews was used, including a tendency to focus on individual missing episodes rather than drawing on this information to develop safeguarding plans or identify patterns that could inform future safeguarding strategies.

Evidence regarding the usefulness of Return Home Interviews and their effectiveness in reducing future missing episodes remains mixed (Boulton et al., 2023; Harris, 2019; Harris & Shalev Greene, 2016). For instance, Harris (2019), found that 81% of police officers reported that Return Home Interviews rarely or never helped prevent future missing episodes, while only 1% reported that they did so always or most of the time. Hill and colleagues (2016) emphasised that Return Home Interviews should be understood as a starting point for identifying needs and facilitating access to appropriate support. This is consistent with Pona and colleagues' (2019) argument previously shared that Return Home Interviews should be understood as part of a wider safeguarding continuum. Bagley's (2015) evaluation was unable to assess the value of Return Home Interviews in isolation but found that successful outcomes were generally attributed to the follow-up support provided. Trusting relationships developed through sustained one-to-one support were identified as particularly important for children's engagement and disclosure, with the project partner delivering this support within a wider multi-agency context. All children interviewed, whether living at home or in care, also identified other people or agencies that supported them, including family members, carers and professionals, with some attributing much of the change they experienced to these sources rather than solely to the project partner services. Children also reported reduced risk relating to exploitation, drug use and physical violence, improved family relationships, greater confidence and self-esteem, better educational prospects and a more positive outlook for the future. Benefits were also reported by parents of children living at home, including reduced stress, improved relationships with their child and increased confidence in managing difficulties at home. Foster carers reported feeling more supported and listened to when project partner services were involved, although no other significant outcomes were identified for this group. However, uncertainty remained regarding whether these outcomes were sustained over time (Bagley, 2015). Hill and colleagues (2016) also emphasised the importance of engaging parents in the Return Home Interview process for children missing from home. Although parental involvement could sometimes make it more difficult to establish rapport with the child, engaging them remained

important because family difficulties were frequently identified as central to children's missing episodes.

## 4.2 Multi-agency safeguarding

The *Statutory Guidance on Children who Run Away or Go Missing from Home or Care* (Department for Education, 2014) identifies safeguarding children who go missing as a shared responsibility requiring effective multi-agency working between local authorities, the police and other partner agencies. It emphasises that safeguarding extends beyond locating children safely and requires coordinated action to identify their vulnerabilities, understand the reasons for the missing episode and any harm experienced, and determine the support needed to reduce the likelihood of future missing episodes. This reflects the complex and often interconnected needs of children who go missing, which span children's services, health, education and justice system (Hutchings et al., 2019; Stevenson & Thomas, 2018). Local Runaway and Missing from Home and Care protocols provide the framework for this coordinated response by establishing arrangements for risk assessment, information-sharing, referral pathways and safeguarding responsibilities across agencies. As discussed in the previous section, the contribution of Return Home Interviews depends not only on the quality of the interview itself, but also on whether the information obtained is shared, acted upon and integrated into wider safeguarding planning (Bagley, 2015; Fox et al., 2024; Pona et al., 2019).

Despite multi-agency safeguarding being consistently identified as central to protecting children who go missing, the available evidence suggests that there are, at times, difficulties in translating the statutory guidance into practice. Fox and colleagues (2024) found that indicators of children's vulnerability and harm were not always recognised or acted upon. In half of the Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews involving children missing from home or care, the child had disclosed harm before the review-triggering incident. Disclosures had been made to school staff, police officers, social workers, carers, health professionals and other children's parents. Moreover, all children had previous contact with children's social services and the police. The authors argued that known vulnerabilities, harm, exploitation indicators and repeated missing episodes provided multiple opportunities to recognise safeguarding concerns and intervene before serious harm occurred. Schools were identified as a particularly important setting for safeguarding because children experiencing serious harm had histories of missing education, with school exclusion being especially common. However, information was frequently underutilised because it was not shared effectively, was considered in relation to individual missing incidents, or professionals had insufficient time to make effective use of available information. In some cases, responses such as school exclusion or reduced supervision may have inadvertently increased children's vulnerability rather than strengthening safeguarding (Fox et al., 2024). These findings support earlier observations by Biehal and Wade (2000), who argued that the close relationship between non-attendance at school, missing episodes and offending highlighted the need for a coordinated multi-agency response.

Pona and colleagues (2019) found that information obtained through Return Home Interviews was commonly shared across agencies and used to inform subsequent support. In their evaluation, almost all participating local authorities reported using this information to inform offers of follow-up support, although only around one-third reported having specialist services available locally for children who go missing. Return Home Interview information

was commonly shared with children's social services by more than 80% of responding local authorities, with the police by more than 70%, and through multi-agency forums by more than half. However, information-sharing practices were inconsistent across local areas, with only around half reporting having an information-sharing protocol in place. The authors identified barriers to effective follow-up and information-sharing, including concerns about data protection, a lack of compatible systems for sharing information across local authority boundaries, limited capacity across agencies to provide follow-up support and insufficient focus on support for children following the Return Home Interview (Pona et al., 2019). Additionally, Bilsdon and Walley (2023a) noted variation in how police forces define repeated missing episodes, with some forces lacking a formal definition. The authors suggested that this may affect the consistency of multi-agency safeguarding responses, as repeated missing episodes are commonly used to trigger coordinated intervention. Similarly, Waring and colleagues (2023a), drawing on interviews with police, local authority, children's social services and children's homes staff from three UK boroughs, found that multi-agency working was facilitated by direct points of contact but hindered by inconsistent definitions of missing episodes, limited understanding of roles and responsibilities, service demand, technological issues and discrepancies in responses to missing episodes.

Bagley's (2015) evaluation identified that positive outcomes were achieved within a wider multi-agency environment, with project partner services working alongside local authorities, the police, schools and other agencies. Importantly, as stated in the previous section, children identified parents and other agencies, alongside project partner services, as important sources of support. These findings suggest that effective multi-agency safeguarding depends not only on partnership working between agencies, but also on sustained collaboration with children, families and the wider support network to ensure that safeguarding responses extend beyond the immediate missing episode and address the underlying factors contributing to children's missing episodes. Consistent with this, Hutchings and colleagues (2019) argued that children who experience repeated missing episodes require intensive, coordinated multi-agency interventions tailored to their individual needs, rather than standardised approaches to safeguarding. More broadly, Monaghan and colleagues' (2025) scoping review identified effective information-sharing, cross-agency technology, single points of contact, regular multi-agency meetings, shared understanding of terminology, clarity of roles and responsibilities, and joint training as mechanisms that may facilitate effective multi-agency responses to children who go missing. However, although multi-agency working is consistently recommended, there remains comparatively little evidence on the implementation and effectiveness of coordinated safeguarding responses for children who go missing (Bilsdon & Walley, 2023a; Chatzisymeonidis et al., 2025; Harris, 2024; Monaghan et al., 2025).

### 4.3 Local interventions for children who experience missing episodes

Alongside the statutory guidance for safeguarding children who go missing, local areas have developed a range of interventions to strengthen safeguarding responses and address children's needs. The interventions vary in their structure and target population but generally aim to improve multi-agency working, enhance information-sharing, strengthen relationships with children, provide tailored support and improve children's outcomes. While the evidence base remains limited, a few local initiatives have been implemented and evaluated, providing

insight into how statutory safeguarding principles have been translated into practice. This section reviews three examples of interventions in England identified within the literature: Missing Person Teams, No Wrong Door and New Roads.

Waring and colleagues (2023b) evaluated a Missing Person Team implemented within one UK police force, responsible for managing missing reports involving children aged 14–17 years. The team, comprising a detective inspector, a detective sergeant and eight detective constables, conducted background checks and risk assessments. For children assessed as presenting no apparent or low risk, the team supported and advised children's homes, social partner agencies, parents and guardians while they undertook reasonable steps to locate them. The number of missing child reports decreased by approximately 47% from baseline following full implementation of the Missing Person Team, with this reduction reaching approximately 63% at six-month follow-up. The implementation was also accompanied by changes in risk assessment practices and improvements in information recording. The process evaluation also identified a more child-centred approach, stronger communication and relationships with care providers, and greater sharing of responsibility between police and partner agencies (Waring et al., 2023b). However, children living in care placements and repeat missing cases remained missing for longer following implementation, particularly those assessed as having no apparent immediate risk. The evidence base for dedicated Missing Person Teams remains limited, with Chatzisymeonidis and colleagues (2025) identifying Waring and colleagues (2023b) as the only study examining the effects, mechanisms and implementation in the UK.

No Wrong Door is an integrated safeguarding intervention model developed by North Yorkshire County Council for young people aged 12–25 years who are in care, on the edge of care, or have recently moved to supported or independent accommodation whilst being supported by this intervention. The model aims to improve accommodation stability, engagement and achievements in education, employment and training, relationships with others, resilience and wellbeing, while reducing high risk behaviours, such as missing episodes, victimisation, offending, substance misuse and other high-risk behaviours. It is delivered through multidisciplinary hubs that bring together residential and outreach workers, psychologists, speech and language therapists, police liaison officers and other specialist practitioners to provide coordinated, strengths-based and restorative support tailored to young people's individual needs. Central to the model are consistent relationships with practitioners, family involvement and multi-agency working (Lushey et al., 2017; Collyer et al., 2021).

The first North Yorkshire evaluation of No Wrong Door found improvements in accommodation stability, education, employment and training, wellbeing and relationships with practitioners, alongside reductions in criminal activity, substance misuse and missing episodes, with missing incidents reducing from 503 in the year before implementation to 253 during the evaluation period (Lushey et al., 2017). A subsequent evaluation examined two extensions of the model to groups beyond young people in or on the edge of care, that is pupils with social, emotional and mental health needs at risk of exclusion, supported through the Back on Track project, and care leavers, supported through the Leaving Care project. This evaluation identified multidisciplinary working, consistent and high-intensity practitioner support, person-centred support, and strengthening young people's relationships with their families and wider support networks as key mechanisms underpinning positive outcomes, including improved functioning at home, school and as independent individuals (Kotecha et

al., 2020). More recently, a pilot evaluation of the implementation of No Wrong Door in Middlesbrough, known locally as Future for Families, found that the model could largely be delivered as intended, with staff and families identifying a number of potential benefits, including reducing risk and increasing safety for young people, reducing and preventing entry to care, improving reunification, and reducing the use of external residential care and out-of-area placements, alongside potential benefits for education and wellbeing (Collyer et al., 2021).

New Roads is based on the No Wrong Door model, and it was developed by Norfolk County Council in partnership with North Yorkshire County Council. It embeds police liaison officers within its hubs, working alongside children's social services staff, to strengthen relationships and information-sharing between young people and the police, with a particular focus on addressing missing episodes. Larsson and colleagues (2023) evaluated the intervention and found that missing episodes and criminal charges reduced significantly among young people supported by New Roads. This reduction was attributed to improved relationship-building and information-sharing between children's social services and the police, and also due to the police, with the support of children's social services and health partners, adopting a tailored and disability-friendly approach to working with individual young people.

These evaluations provide valuable insights into the implementation and potential benefits of local safeguarding interventions, however, they also share several important limitations. Most were undertaken during the early stages of implementation, meaning that longer-term outcomes could not be assessed and, in some cases, the interventions had not yet reached full implementation (Collyer et al., 2021; Lushey et al., 2017). Methodologically, the evaluations employed a range of designs, including implementation and feasibility studies, mixed-methods evaluations, quasi-experimental analyses and interrupted time series analysis. However, several relied on relatively small samples, limited comparison groups, short follow-up periods or qualitative evidence (Collyer et al., 2021; Kotecha et al., 2020; Larsson et al., 2023; Lushey et al., 2017; Waring et al., 2023b). In addition, outcome data were not always available or ready to assess intervention effectiveness, and not all evaluations demonstrated statistically significant improvements in their primary quantitative outcomes, with some reporting positive findings primarily through qualitative evidence or implementation measures (Collyer et al., 2021; Kotecha et al., 2020; Lushey et al., 2017; Waring et al., 2023b). Furthermore, each evaluation was conducted within a single police force or local authority and a specific implementation context, limiting the generalisability of the findings to other settings (Collyer et al., 2021; Kotecha et al., 2020; Larsson et al., 2023; Lushey et al., 2017; Waring et al., 2023b). These limitations indicate that further longitudinal and comparative evaluations are required to establish the effectiveness, sustainability and transferability of local safeguarding interventions.

## Conclusion

This literature review has provided an analysis of a range of research using varied methodologies on children missing from home and from care. This analysis has highlighted the complex interaction of factors in children's lives and in the multi-agency systems designed to support children and reduce the risks of going missing.

Through its synthesis of literature on the themes of children's characteristics, vulnerabilities, harms experienced, and safeguarding responses, the review has identified some issues and some gaps in the literature which can provide important directions for future research. These are summarised below.

**Unmet needs across multiple systems.** The review has emphasised that children who go missing are predominantly adolescents, who alongside the challenges associated with this developmental period, have a range of unmet needs across a number of systems. This includes unmet needs within family or social care such as conflicts, abuse or bullying, and a lack of positive attachment figures; within health, through the prevalence of mental ill health and disabilities; and within education, through school absences or school exclusions. These, in turn, can lead to exposure to further harm and increase family stress. The interaction of these vulnerabilities warrants further investigation through longitudinal analysis of children's pathways within children's social care, education, health and criminal justice in order to understand children's needs more holistically and identify possible intervention points. More research is also needed on children's long-term outcomes of going missing, for example following single versus repeated missing episodes and on overlapping and differing implications and risks of being missing from home and missing from care.

**Educational difficulties.** Being absent from school, having school difficulties, being bullied or being excluded from school feature in many of the research articles reviewed. Due to overlapping needs and vulnerabilities, children who go missing may also be struggling in education because of their social, emotional or behavioural challenges. Alternatively, the difficulties children have within educational settings, particularly if their needs are not recognised and supported, may contribute to missing episodes (as a push factor). The relationship between going missing from home or care and being absent or excluded from education needs to be unpicked and explored further.

**Overrepresented children.** The review highlighted the overrepresentation of certain groups of children in missing episodes, which include children of minority ethnicity unaccompanied children, disabled and neurodivergent children (specifically children with autism or ADHD), and children with mental ill health. Further research is needed to understand these children's experiences of missing episodes and of the statutory safeguarding processes. How these children's needs, including within education and health, are identified and addressed by statutory multi-agency safeguarding processes also remain to be explored, particularly when identities overlap (e.g. ethnicity and neurodiversity).

**Children with repeat missing episodes.** A smaller but significant group of children who go missing are those with repeat missing episodes. Children who repeatedly go missing are more likely to experience significant harms (including through exploitation) and multiple disadvantages and yet systems struggle to identify children who go missing repeatedly and to recognise the harms they encounter. This results in missed opportunities for intervention and support. What effective information-sharing and multi-agency safeguarding practice across agencies looks like for this group of children needs to be established. Further research on police risk assessment and identification of harm, including in relation to new risks such as child trafficking, is also needed.

**Protective factors.** Unsurprisingly, research on children who go missing tends to be risk-focused and the lack of protective factors are noted to be a risk in itself in several of the articles reviewed. There remains a significant research gap on the protective factors in

children, families, carers and systems that can promote children's wellbeing and reduce missing episodes and harm.

**Statutory safeguarding processes.** Further evidence is needed on the multi-agency working, information-sharing, data analysis, Return Home Interviews, and Safe and Well checks, including the effectiveness of these processes, established by the 2014 statutory guidance. Now that more than a decade has passed since the statutory guidance was issued, there is also a need to revisit it, evaluate its implementation, and build on the evidence of more recent practice developments, such as Philomena, No Wrong Door and New Roads.

The findings from this literature review can combine with the findings of the scoping review to identify the key research questions to take forward as a priority.

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