



# **High Risk? Attitudes to the Risk Assessment Process in Missing Person Investigations**

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## *FOREWORD*

**The Centre for the Study of Missing Persons (CSMP)** is a specialist research centre within the Institute of Criminal Justice Studies, at the University of Portsmouth (<http://www.port.ac.uk/departments/academic/icjs/csmp/> ). The Centre was founded in April 2012, in partnership with the charity Missing People, to accommodate the growing interest in the field of missing persons. It aims to provide a clear focus for research, knowledge transfer and educational provision to academics, professionals in this community and relatives of missing people. The Centre also aims to function as a one-stop knowledge resource which researchers and other interested parties can access, and use to communicate and exchange knowledge about missing persons.

The authors of this report would like to acknowledge the effort and thank the men and women who took part in this study and completed our survey.

If you wish to discuss any element of this study with us please contact Dr. Karen Shalev Greene ([Karen.shalev-greene@port.ac.uk](mailto:Karen.shalev-greene@port.ac.uk) or [csmp@port.ac.uk](mailto:csmp@port.ac.uk)), Director of the Centre for the Study of Missing Persons, Institute of Criminal Justice Studies, University of Portsmouth, St. George's Building, 141 High Street, Portsmouth, PO1 2HY, Tel: +44 (023)92843938

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The aim of this study is to critically evaluate the attitudes of police sergeants to the initial risk assessment process in a missing person investigation. The assessment of risk, in the early stages of a missing person investigation, is used as a catalyst for the investigative activity that follows. An incident that is deemed to be high risk will attract significant resources, intensive supervision and substantial oversight from senior officers. Incidents carrying lower risk will not receive the same levels of attention. The appropriate determination of risk, at the earliest possible stage, is therefore essential for effective deployment of resources and a successful outcome of the investigation.

In the majority of Police forces across the UK, this assessment of risk will lead to one of three outcomes – high, medium or low. This assessment will reflect the level of risk to the missing person, or to society at large. This will vary between immediate and substantial risk, to no apparent threat at all, to either the subject or the public (ACPO, 2010). The sample force has not yet implemented the new classification of ‘absent’ at this stage. Therefore, this study refers to ‘missing’ cases only.

Given the complexity of the risk assessment process and the specific demands and challenges faced by police officers investigating missing person cases, this study considers the concept of the risk assessment process, from the perspective of those who are charged with making these initial decisions – police sergeants. This research explores attitudes toward a number of key concepts, including: appropriateness of existing practices, training, national guidance and support from senior leaders.

This study was undertaken during July-August 2013 as part of an MSc dissertation at the University of Portsmouth. An online survey was used to canvass the opinions of 215 police sergeants employed within a large English police force – to understand their attitudes towards risk assessment. This study does not propose that conclusions drawn can be generalised across all police forces in the UK, but some findings may resonate nationally.

The vast majority of participants stated that the welfare of the missing person is the most important part of these investigations. However, 50% of these officers may not have the training/knowledge to fulfil their obligations as efficiently (and, possibly, as successfully) as they should. Key findings reveal that although published guidance documents and bespoke training is intended to ensure these officers are able to make informed decisions about risk, **51%** of the participants had never read the national ACPO guidance documentation, **49%**

had never read the internal standard operating procedure and no less than **47%** believed their training had been inadequate.

The study also highlights that while officers are asked to decide if a missing person case presents a high, medium or low risk – to the person, and to society at large, the decision making process that generates these risk ratings is often regarded as subjective and inconsistent.

The authors make the following recommendations:

- ✓ ACPO may wish to consider developing a framework that guides investigators through the risk assessment process.
- ✓ ACPO may wish to review the effectiveness of the High / Medium / Low risk ratings and consider if a different scale may be of benefit.
- ✓ The police force taking part in this study should review how successfully externally generated information can flow into and through the organisation.
- ✓ A re-professionalisation of the role of the Duty Inspector within the risk assessment process should take place. Ownership of a missing person case should sit with the Duty Inspector for 48 hours – passed between shifts. Importantly, this should lead to a genuine critical review of the risk assessment at each handover.
- ✓ An aide memoire, akin to those used within Domestic Violence investigations, should be developed to improve the standard (and consistency) of initial investigations – and the supervisory response that follows.
- ✓ When delivering the course which should be given to officers who have been promoted, there should be a specific missing persons input. This should be supplemented with further input during professional development days.
- ✓ It may also be useful to compare officers' attitudes between Police forces as attitudes may vary and reflect different practices across the UK.

## 1. Introduction

Missing person investigations are widely regarded as a demanding challenge for the police service. It is estimated that in 2011/2012 313,000 missing person incidents were recorded in England and Wales (SOCA, 2013). Shalev Greene & Pakes (2012) estimate that a medium risk medium term missing person investigation costs £1,325.44-£2,415.8 and that the annual cost of missing person investigations will equate to 19,188 Police Constables working full time or to 14% of the total number of full time police officers across the UK. Thus, missing person investigations are exceptionally resource intensive.

A missing person is defined as “Anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established and where the circumstances are out of character or the context suggests the person may be subject of crime or at risk of harm to themselves or another” (ACPO, 2013, pg. 5). ACPO (2010) consider risk assessment as follows: “any missing person investigation may become a critical incident...The management of risk requires that a supervisor reviews the risk assessment as soon as practicable [and instigates] further enquiries...to validate the initial risk assessment” (ACPO, 2010 p.26-27”).

This assessment of risk will lead to one of three outcomes – high, medium or low. It may be useful to understand how ACPO (2010, p.24) define these terms:

**High Risk** – “The risk posed is immediate and there are substantial grounds for believing that the subject is in danger through their own vulnerability; or [as a] victim of serious crime; or...the public is in danger”.

**Medium Risk** – “The risk posed is likely to place the subject in danger or they are a threat to themselves or others”.

**Low** – “There is no apparent threat of danger to either the subject or the public. [those] under 18 should not be included in this classification”.

Previous research has identified some of the risks involved with going missing. These vary between children and adults who go missing. The risks associated with children going missing include becoming a victim of crime and becoming involved with criminal activity through the commission of 'survival' crimes. Risks associated more with adults are being homeless, and coming to harm through injury, an accident or self-harm (Biehal, Mitchell & Wade, 2003; Hayden & Goodship, 2013; Parr & Fyfe, 2012).

The concept of risk assessment extends far beyond the realms of missing person investigations; it is prevalent within many areas of police activity and indeed in wider society. However, the assessment of risk, in the early stages of a missing person investigation, is used as a catalyst for the investigative activity that follows. An incident that is deemed to be high risk will attract significant resources, intrusive supervision and substantial oversight from senior officers. Incidents carrying lower risk will not receive the same levels of attention.

The appropriate determination of risk, at the earliest possible stage, is therefore essential for the successful outcome of the investigation. Assess the risk as being too low and significant harm may befall a missing person due to a lack of resources being allocated. Assess the risk as too high and a disproportionate number of resources may be committed to the investigation which keeps resources from more pressing policing matters.

Despite risk assessment being a crucial facet within a missing person investigation Hayden & Goodship (2013) found that the capacity to respond and meaningfully risk assess every case of missing children was hampered by high volume of reports and out of hours activity when few professionals are available (pg. 14).

Michalsen (2003) suggests that there is subjectivity to the process of risk assessment. This would appear to have considerable relevance for the police service, when dealing with missing person enquiries. For example, a number of subjective terms are used within the risk assessment definitions stated above: "immediate", "substantial grounds", "vulnerability". These terms invite subjective opinion to be applied when making risk assessment decisions which may be

presenting challenges for the police service. The police service deals with facts, evidence and reasoned judgement, so the need to look beyond subjectivity is necessary to make effective decisions, as recognised by The National Decision Model (ACPO, 2013).

Given the complexity of the risk assessment process and the specific demands and challenges faced by police officers investigating missing person cases, this study considers the concept of the risk assessment process in missing person investigations, from the perspective of those who are charged with making these initial decisions – police sergeants. These officers are the first level of supervision during the early stages of an investigation. Information may still be scarce, family members may have high expectations and resources are limited. Therefore, this research explores attitudes toward a number of key concepts, including: training, national guidance, support from senior leaders and the appropriateness of existing practices.

**Thus, the aim of this study is:**

- To critically evaluate the attitudes of police sergeants to the initial risk assessment process in a missing person investigation.

## **2. Method**

This study was undertaken in partnership with a large English police force as part of an MSc dissertation at the University of Portsmouth.

Responsibilities of operational officers within this force include critical issues such as responding to homicides, road traffic collisions and scenes of domestic violence – as well as high visibility reassurance patrols through neighbourhood policing teams. Missing person enquiries sit alongside violent crime and sexual offences as being recognised as the kind of investigation that can have a detrimental impact on public confidence if the police response is seen to be inadequate.

The sample force has not yet implemented the new classification of 'absent' at this stage, preferring to observe implementation elsewhere in England and Wales, to capture learning and benefit from the experiences of other forces, prior to implementation in 2014. Therefore, this study refers to 'missing' cases only.

An online survey was used via SurveyMonkey. The web link to the survey was shared with all uniformed police sergeants within the force. Access to this sample population was via email, with the permission of the lead ACPO officer for missing person activity. The online survey was opened 16<sup>th</sup> July and closed on 26<sup>th</sup> July 2013

A combination of open and closed questions was identified as being appropriate (see a template of the survey in appendix 1). Closed questions (dealt with through a 'radio button' response) were used to generate the quantifiable data that was sought. Open questions (that invite unstructured narrative from the respondent) were included to ensure that an appropriate depth of qualitative data was also collected.

A total of 27 questions were presented to the respondents. None of them were mandatory and the explanation was given that any of the questions could be skipped if required. There were a total of 12 completely closed questions (radio button response), 13 questions that were closed, but allowed for a supplementary narrative response and 2 completely open questions inviting free narrative.

### **3. Results**

215 officers responded to the survey.

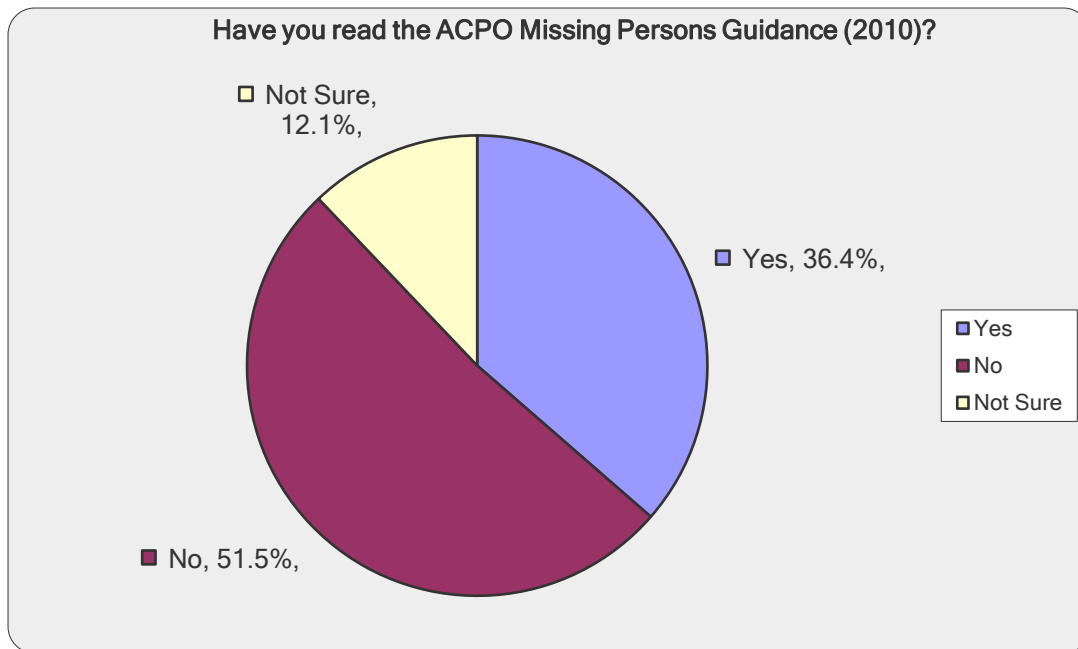
#### **3.1 Demographic Information**

68% of the respondents were aged between 31 and 45 years of age and 81% of the participants were male. The sample population were very experienced - 100% of respondents have at least 5 years' service: 57% of respondents have between 6 and 15 years' service. Just over 25% of all those who took part in the survey have service that exceeds 20 years. 93.4% of the participants had held the rank of sergeant for at least 2 years.



### 3.2 Guidance Documents

Over half of respondents (51%) stated that they had never read the ACPO Missing Persons Guidance (2010), with a further 12% being unsure if they had ever done so. Only 36% were able to confirm that they had read this key publication (see figure 1).



**Figure 1 Knowledge of ACPO Guidance (2010)**

It is recognised that this key national publication is also supported by documentation produced locally by the force concerned, to offer guidance at force level to ensure that supervisors are able to discharge their responsibilities.

Participants were also asked if they had read this force level guidance. 49% of respondents had not done so.

With half of respondents not having read the national guidance and half of respondents not having read the force level guidance, it is apparent that knowledge is gained through informal means – tacitly, and without reference to formal documentation. The unique nature of the policing profession is such that many parts of the job are learnt in this way, but clearly the organisation would be open to challenge when key decisions (such as assessing risk) are not based on solid foundations. It could be suggested that the organisation appears content that training

responsibilities have been discharged by producing documentation, with few checks and balances that ensure such documentation is digested and acted upon.

### **3.3 Knowledge of the risk definitions – High, Medium & Low**

The vast majority of sergeants (86%) stated they were aware of the definitions of the three categories of risk. When looking beyond this quantifiable data to the qualitative responses that were invited, there is further insightful information. 20 people provided a narrative response in relation to this issue - 18 of whom gave some kind of commentary that suggested they were aware of the definition, in general terms, but not necessarily having a full understanding of the terminology or where it came from. For example,

- *“I have a general understanding...but have never seen them in these terms”*
- *“yes, but not the exact wording, more the gist of it”.*
- *Never explained to me. However, they are common sense and I’m confident my own approach reflects the definitions anyway.*
- *Wasn’t aware of the actual wording, but common sense prevails.*

These narrative responses reinforce that a sense of experiential knowledge sometimes pervades, rather than presenting an informed position drawn from specific learning or training. Whilst not expressly invited in the question that led to this data (Q7; ACPO define risk within missing person investigations as High / Medium / Low. Are you aware of these definitions?) it is notable that there were no offerings in terms of the procedural aspects of determining risk. So whilst the quantitative data paints an assured picture of knowledge, the free narrative shows the officers in a somewhat less confident light and a tendency to engage in more subjective interpretation of the official ACPO definitions.

It is clear from these findings that precise knowledge of the guidance is lacking for many officers. The degree to which this lack of knowledge impacts on the quality of delivery is a point that raises much debate. Hayden and Goodship (2013) cite Munro’s (2010) comments on this very issue – identifying that the police service will often work to produce protocols for every possible scenario, but that this only serves

to prove corporate due diligence, rather than genuinely enhancing the knowledge of staff.

It is, therefore, recommended that a training programme is developed to enhance understanding of the risk definitions and ensure a consistent, objective approach to these classifications. This should be delivered at sergeant level, with an expectation of wider dissemination to police constables. Whilst delivery through online training methods has been identified as the corporate preference in recent years; however, the importance of this subject matter suggests that face to face delivery through subject matter experts may be preferable.

### **3.4 Timeliness of Supervision**

73% of respondents stated that initial supervision of missing person risk assessment process was carried out “as soon as practicable”. 43 officers (23%) offered further qualitative narrative on this issue. In contrast to the finding above, the common theme in the free narrative was the impracticality of immediate supervision and the conflicting demands that are placed on supervisors. For example,

- *“not always possible if you are dealing with a high risk incident”*
- *“it’s not always possible”.*

This theme was repeated throughout the free text responses, in contrast to the quantified majority who stated that the risk assessment supervision was carried out as soon as possible.

Further comments included:

- *“It is often impractical”...*
- *“Demand negates this and a lack of staff”...*
- *“Time frames do not always allow...although every effort is made to comply”...*
- *“Often I find myself as the only sergeant and other operational needs stop me from doing this immediately”.*

The key theme presented above is that officers are unable to guarantee immediate supervision due to other responsibilities that are placed on them. This raises significant questions as to the quality of the investigation that follows (and its timeliness) if this supervision is not happening as promptly as may be expected.

Therefore, it is recommended that procedures are enhanced to identify opportunities for more timely supervision. This may mean that control room supervisors are better placed to offer this scrutiny rather than those who are charged with providing an “on the street” presence who may be less able to complete critical review of risk and make administrative updates to missing persons reports.

### **3.5 Senior Officer Engagement**

When asked if they consult with an Inspector before making a risk assessment decision, 23% of respondents stated they “always” did this - 44% stated this consultation would happen “occasionally”. Data presented has already shown that a considerable number of officers (51%) have not read the national ACPO guidance, 49% have not read the forces own guidance and 47% have little faith in the training they have received. If consultation with an Inspector can be thought of as a governance arrangement to quality assure this process, , this data shows that opportunities are being missed– with 44% of sergeants only occasionally consulting an Inspector during the risk assessment process.

39% of respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed that they were able to consult with senior managers when making risk assessment decisions. 43% said they agreed or strongly agreed that this consultation was possible.

The accompanying free text responses presented concerns around accessibility of senior leaders and a perceived lack of experience and/or ability around tactical decision making. Examples include:

- *“I never consult senior managers...they are remote from the teams and have often not had front line experience for many years”...*
- *“You would have to find one first, and then one who is willing to assist!”...*
- *“I have never had to consult with senior managers regarding risk assessments”...*

- *“I wouldn’t speak to a Chief Inspector about risk assessment decisions, but would speak re high risk if necessary”*

It is recommended that senior managers would benefit from consulting with operational officers more widely on issues such as this; requesting regular feedback from staff about the force’s practices and areas for improvement.

The lack of consultation with senior officers (Inspector and above) could be viewed as a negative commentary toward those in the sergeant rank. On the contrary, this report suggests that the willingness of these senior officers to involve themselves in this vital risk assessment work should be reviewed. It is recommended that a re-professionalisation of the role of the Duty Inspector within the risk assessment process should take place. Ownership of a missing person case should sit with the Duty Inspector for 48 hours. Each case should be passed between Inspectors when the new shift takes over. Importantly, this should lead to a genuine critical review of the risk assessment, not simply assuming that the current assessment of risk is appropriate. There may also be some benefit in re-developing the missing persons software programme to ensure adequate documentation of the handover process; the key deliverable being a training package that makes the role of the Duty Inspector clear.

### **3.6 Current Risk Assessment Method**

21% of officers stated that the High / Medium / Low system does not provide an adequate means of assessing risk. There appeared to be two key themes presented in the free text responses.

Firstly, a number of officers suggested that too many people were grouped together through the H / M / L classification and that some kind of sliding scale was needed - especially in relation to the medium risk category, where so many missing person investigations are believed to lie.

- “I believe the system is too arbitrary and fails to take into account the sheer range of missing person investigations...the system appears totally subjective rather than being objective

- “High and low seem to be adequate...there seem to be a large number that fall into medium risk and therefore some sort grading of medium would assist in prioritising”
- “Youth immediately bumps someone to Medium whereas realistically most of these are low”

Secondly, the concept of gut feeling and subjectivity was also articulated – offering a view that this was the true determinant of risk, rather than an objective classification system.

- “It’s very often down to gut feeling”
- “A scoring system would be easier to interpret”.

These comments suggest there is an appetite for change and a desire to see a more appropriate risk assessment methodology provided. Importantly, it must be stressed that High, Medium, Low are **outcomes** and not a means of assessing risk in themselves. The actual method that leads to this outcome is unclear.

It is recommended that an aide memoire, similar to those used within Domestic Violence investigations, should be developed to improve the standard (and consistency) of initial investigations – and the supervisory response that follows. Furthermore, a bespoke risk assessment model should be created to ensure that objective, defensible risk assessment decisions can be made. Within the field of anti-social behaviour there is a “vulnerability assessment” that provides a number of questions that the investigating officer should consider. This includes such issues as the repeated nature of the incident, the support network available to the individual and any aggravating factors that may be of concern. Depending on the answers provided, a score is reached that will grade the risk faced by the victim. This system would remove much (although not all) of the subjectivity associated with assessing risk in missing person investigations.

From a national perspective, ACPO may also wish to reflect on this recommendation and consider how to enhance the framework by which risk assessment decisions are made. As mentioned above, this may include a pre-defined process of questions and

prompts that takes the investigator (and subsequently the supervisor) through a staged, objective risk assessment process.

### 3.7 Training

47% of officers either disagreed or strongly disagreed that the training they had received allowed them to make informed decisions about risk. Only 32% believed that their training had been adequate. These statistics would appear to support the earlier findings in relation to knowledge of the key guidance documents that are intended to underpin missing person investigations. The narrative responses provide some insight into the strength of feeling on this matter. Many officers appeared to adopt a tone that showed some dissatisfaction, or even frustration, at the lack of training that had been received.

The following examples articulate this perspective:

- *“What training”...“*
- *“I apply common sense. If you can train people to use common sense let me know”...*
- *“I have not received any training on how to supervise a missing person investigation or assess risk”...*
- *“Never had any training on investigating missing persons”...*
- *“This is one area where the force is failing, most supervisors have had to teach themselves”...*

40 respondents provided an additional written response to this question, the majority of whom held views in keeping with the narrative comments shown above.

Tacit knowledge is no substitute for a clear and consistent corporate position on how supervisors should deal with the risk assessment of a missing person investigation. When delivering the course given to officers who have been promoted, there should be a specific missing persons contribution. This should be supplemented with input during professional development days.

### 3.8 Supervisors' Priorities

The respondents were asked to consider the importance of four different considerations that may be of note during the initial stages of a missing person investigation:

Answer Options	1st Priority	2nd Priority	3rd Priority	4th Priority
Welfare of the missing person	171	13	4	2
Resources that are available to me	9	112	40	29
Impact of the case on organizational reputation	2	43	87	58
Impact of the case on my professional standing in the organization	8	22	59	101

**Table 1      Prioritising Considerations**

Table 1 gives some positive insight into the values that underpin the work of the respondent population.

### 3.9 Critical Reflections on Risk

50% of respondents stated they would 'occasionally' change the risk assessment as circumstances evolve. A minority, 47%, stated they were 'likely' or 'very likely' to do so. With half of the participants not altering their assessment of risk as the investigation develops, it is apparent that this process is not as flexible and responsive as may have been expected. This finding may also suggest that the original risk assessment was correct and thus does not need to change.

21 narrative responses were also provided regarding the process of risk assessment. No obvious themes were identified within this qualitative data. The officers presented views around getting on with the process of finding the missing person, the uniqueness of each investigation and the importance of showing some



flexibility when considering young people; examples of these responses are provided below:

- *“Mainly aged related. 10-13 year olds can become higher later on in the day”...*
- *“What is a typical investigation? Risk levels change when required”*
- *“Never say never, but very rarely”...*
- *“Risk assessment is an ongoing, organic process, both upwards and downwards”...*
- *“Each investigation is unique and must be seen as such, therefore this can only be answered on a case by case basis. There is no such thing as a typical misper case”.*

### 3.10 Tactical Options

It can be seen in Table 2 that 90% of respondents make a direct link between their risk assessment decision and the tactics that are employed to find the missing person.

Do you consider that the tactics you deploy for a missing person investigation are dependent upon the risk rating you have given?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	92.0%	172
No	6.4%	12
Not Sure	1.6%	3
Other comments or suggestions		16
<i>answered question</i>		<b>187</b>
<i>skipped question</i>		<b>28</b>

**Table 2      Altering initial risk assessment**

This is an important finding, even if not surprising to most practitioners. It shows that risk assessment is not just an administrative process – it drives the operational activity that follows and has direct impact on the speed with which investigations can

be concluded. That being the case, this is at odds with the finding that risk assessments are not always adjusted as circumstances develop.

The findings of this study offer no further conclusions or recommendations on this matter. There is a need for further study to identify the foundations behind this apparent disconnect between using risk assessment flexibly (or not) and making decisions as to how investigative options should be identified.

#### **4. Discussion and Conclusions**

This study made use of an online survey. Responses were provided by 215 police sergeants, to 27 questions. The officers were experienced people in their field, adding weight to their views and increasing the validity of the survey.

Half of the respondents had never read the national missing persons guidance provided by the Association of Chief Police Officers. Half of the respondents had never read the force's internal guidance document. Half of the respondents believed their training was inadequate and half of the respondents believed their line manager had not taken any steps to develop their knowledge of risk assessing missing person investigations. These are key findings from this study; a workforce where, seemingly, 50% of the population are not in a position to deliver national / force standards of risk assessment in missing person investigations.

Of equal significance is the data that shows the majority of participants **were** nevertheless confident in their ability to identify risk and act accordingly.

The same officers who have articulated such dis-engagement with corporate procedures that are in place to educate, train and guide are confident to articulate their thorough understanding of how the risk assessment of missing person investigations works. The challenge for senior managers within the force is to gain an understanding of how police sergeants **think** they should be doing their job and realign this with corporate requirements of what they **should** be doing. The nature of the work involved – assessing risk to determine if significant harm may befall a missing person (or member of the public) – is such that reliance on anything other than formal training would be inappropriate.

A reassuring finding from this study is that the vast majority of participants stated that the missing person is the most important part of a missing person investigation. The authors therefore recommend that:

1. ACPO may wish to consider developing a framework that guides investigators through the risk assessment process. This may include a pre-defined process of questions and prompts that takes the investigator (and subsequently the supervisor) through a staged, objective assessment of risk – improving consistency and critical thought.
2. ACPO may wish to review the effectiveness of the High / Medium / Low risk ratings and consider if a different, further differentiated scale may be of benefit.
3. The police force taking part in this study should review how successfully externally generated information can flow into and through the organisation. It is unclear from this research whether the blockage is remote from the sergeants involved, or whether there are personal responsibility issues that mean the reading / understanding of essential documentation is not taking place. If the latter is the case, the force may wish to explore how more face-to-face delivery of the messages in this documentation could take place to ensure that key messages are disseminated correctly. This leads into the wider issue of training delivery.
4. A re-professionalisation of the role of the Duty Inspector within the risk assessment process should take place. Ownership of a missing person case should sit with the Duty Inspector for 48 hours – passed between shifts. Importantly, this should lead to a genuine critical review of the risk assessment at each handover.
5. An aide memoire, akin to those used within Domestic Violence investigations, should be developed to improve the standard (and consistency) of initial investigations – and the supervisory response that follows. In practice, this will

involve the initial investigator (and subsequently their supervisor) being in possession of a guidance booklet that takes the officer through a number of questions, ensuring that the informant is prompted to provide all possible information to the police.

6. When delivering the course given to officers who have been promoted, there should be a specific missing persons input. This should be supplemented with further input during professional development days.
7. It may also be useful to compare officers' attitudes between police forces as attitudes may vary and reflect different practices across the UK.

This study does not propose that conclusions drawn can be generalised across all police forces in the UK. The challenge of making sure that national guidance is able to permeate all levels of an organisation is a consideration for all police forces – especially where good practice from outside the organisation may be able to rectify specific challenges.

This study has already considered the notion of risk outcomes versus risk assessment. This is worthy of further reflection. Missing persons' literature (both academic and practitioner focussed) is awash with reference to High / Medium / Low risk ratings. It is infrequent that these outcomes are recognised as a product of a preceding process. The participants in this study offered plentiful commentary on their confidence in defining a risk rating – but not necessarily on how they arrived at such decisions. The authors recommend further research should examine these issues in more depth.

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## **Appendix 1- The Survey**

### **Section A - Demographics**

#### **Q1. Age?**

<25

25 – 30

31 – 35

36 – 40

41 – 45

46 – 50

>50

#### **Q2. Total Length of Police Service (to closest year)**

<5 years

6 – 10 years

11 – 15 years

16 – 20 years

>20 years

#### **Q3. Years in rank of Sergeant (to closest year)**

<2 years

2 – 4 years

5 – 7 years

8 – 10 years

>10 years

#### **Q4. Gender**

Male

Female

#### **Q5. Promoted to Sergeant via**

TOWBAR

Traditional OSPRE Part 2

**Section B – Policy and Procedure**

**Q6. The ACPO Missing Persons Guidance (2010) sets out expectations for the management of missing person investigations. It includes information relating to initial reporting standards, assessment of risk and supervisory expectations. Have you read this document?**

Yes

No

Not Sure

**Q7. ACPO define risk within missing person investigations as follows:**

**High Risk** – “The risk posed is immediate and there are substantial grounds for believing that the subject is in danger through their own vulnerability; or [as a] victim of serious crime; or...the public is in danger”. **Medium Risk** – “The risk posed is likely to place the subject in danger or they are a threat to themselves or others”. **Low** – “There is no apparent threat of danger to either the subject or the public. [those] under 18 should not be included in this classification”. **Are you aware of these definitions?**

Yes

No

Not Sure

If no, please explain:

**Q8. The ACPO guidance states that the initial supervision of the risk assessment should be done as soon as practicable. In high risk cases, this should be immediate. Do you always adhere to these supervisory expectations?**

Yes

No

If no, please explain:

**Q9. The force has a standard operating procedure (SOP) that relates to missing person investigations. Have you ever read this document?**

Yes

No

Other, please specify:

**Q10. There is a central team that coordinate missing person activity across the force. Have you ever used them for support guidance?**

Yes

No

I've never heard of Operation Compass

Any other comments?

**Section C – Current Practices, Training and Development**

**Q11. The High / Medium / Low system is an adequate means of assessing risk in missing person investigations.**

Strongly Agree

Agree

Neither Agree nor Disagree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

Don't Know

Any other comments?

**Q12. The current risk definitions (High, Medium, Low) enable me to make effective decisions about risk.**

Strongly Agree

Agree

Neither Agree nor Disagree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

Don't Know

Any other comments?

**Q13. The current risk definitions (High, Medium, Low) are fit for purposes.**

Strongly Agree

Agree

Neither Agree nor Disagree



Disagree  
Strongly Disagree  
Don't Know  
Any other comments?

**Q14. The training I have received as a supervisor allows me to make informed decisions about risk.**

Strongly Agree  
Agree  
Neither Agree nor Disagree  
Disagree  
Strongly Disagree  
Don't Know  
Any other comments?

**Q15. My line manager has taken steps to develop my knowledge and understanding of risk assessment decisions.**

Strongly Agree  
Agree  
Neither Agree nor Disagree  
Disagree  
Strongly Disagree  
Don't Know  
Any other comments?

**Section D – Confidence in Professional Ability**

**Q16. Do you consult with an Inspector before making a risk assessment decision in a missing person investigation.**

Always  
Often  
Occasionally  
Never

**Q17. When presented with information by my officers, I am confident I can identify a HIGH risk missing person case correctly.**

Strongly Agree

Agree

Neither Agree nor Disagree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

Don't Know

**Q18. When presented with information by my officers, I am confident I can identify a MEDIUM risk missing person case correctly.**

Strongly Agree

Agree

Neither Agree nor Disagree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

Don't Know

**Q19. When presented with information by my officers, I am confident I can identify a LOW risk missing person case correctly.**

Strongly Agree

Agree

Neither Agree nor Disagree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

Don't Know

**Q20. I feel able to consult with senior managers (Chief Inspector or above) to gain assistance in making risk assessment decisions.**

Strongly Agree

Agree

Neither Agree nor Disagree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

Don't Know

**Q21. Please add any additional comments or suggestions that are related to the previous 5 questions.**

**Section E – Considering Organisational Reputation**

**Q22. The considerations shown below may impact on your decision making during the initial stages of a missing person investigation. Please select an importance rating for each of the 4 considerations.**

Welfare of the missing person

Resources that are available to me

Impact of the case on organisational reputation

Impact of the case on my professional standing in the organisation

**Q23. If necessary, please expand on these responses in the box below.**

**Section F – The Changing Nature of Risk / Tactical Options**

**Q24. During a typical missing person investigation, how likely is it that you will change the risk assessment as circumstances evolve?**

Very likely

Likely

Occasionally

Never

Other comments or suggestions:

**Q25. If circumstances evolve and you wish to change the risk assessment, do you consult with an Inspector, or do you change the risk assessment without further consultation?**

I only change the risk assessment once I have consulted with an Inspector

I change the risk assessment without further consultation

I don't change the risk assessment after I have made the initial assessment of High/Medium/Low

Other comments or suggestions

**Q26. Do you consider that the tactics you deploy for a missing person investigation are dependant upon the risk rating you have given?**

Yes

No

Not sure

Other comments or suggestions:

**Q27. As circumstances change during an investigation, would you alter your tactics without first considering if the risk assessment is still appropriate?**

Yes

No

Other comments or suggestions: