

CHILDREN AND YOUTH
REPORTED MISSING FROM
OUT-OF-HOME-CARE
IN AUSTRALIA:

A review of the literature and analysis of
Australian police data

A report prepared for the Australian Federal Police
Missing Persons Coordination Centre
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KATH MCFARLANE CONSULTING

Dr Kath McFarlane

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Statistical analysis was undertaken by Dr Peter Geelan-Small, Statistical Consultant, Stats Central, Mark Wainwright Analytical Centre, University of New South Wales.

Supplementary analysis was undertaken by:

Keegan Altmann

Breezy Altmann

John Murray

INTRODUCTION

In 2019, the Australian Federal Police National Missing Persons Coordination Centre (the 'NMPCC') contracted The Community Restorative Centre Limited and Kath McFarlane Consulting Pty Ltd to produce a report setting out a national picture of children and young people reported missing in Australia.

The aim of the project was to aid insight into the incidence of missing person reports received by police, so as to allow the NMPCC to determine and implement prevention strategies with State and Territory police to safeguard at-risk youth. Particular attention was to be directed to youth (aged 13-17 years inclusive) in Out Of Home Care ('OOHC').

Australian State and Territory police services supplied de-identified data relating to 1171 individuals and 3009 episodes involving children and young people reported missing during a 30-day period in 2019.

The project team examined this data to identify:

- The characteristics and attributes of missing youth;
- The characteristics and attributes of specific categories of missing youth, namely those who repeatedly go missing; and
- Jurisdictional similarities and differences in policy and procedures for reporting missing youth.

Following receipt of the report in 2020, the NMPCC determined to publicly release a report into children and youth (aged 0-18 years) reported missing from OOHC in Australia. Analysis of the police data is presented alongside a review of international and domestic academic and 'grey' literature to provide further insight into the incidence, motivations, and experiences of children and young people who go missing from OOHC, and agency responses to them.

In March 2020, almost a year after this report was commissioned, the Victorian Commission for Children and Young People announced its inquiry into young people who are absent or missing from residential care.¹ This announcement highlighted the importance of identifying the particular drivers for young people who go missing, to increase understanding of their experiences while missing, and to encourage agencies to respond effectively and appropriately when youth are located.

METHODS

DEVELOPMENT OF THE PROJECT

This report provides an analysis of the data provided by police in all Australian jurisdictions (with one exception), regarding children and youth (0-18 years of age) who were reported missing during a 30-day period in 2019. Particular attention was paid to youth (aged 13-17 inclusive) reported missing from OOHC.

The project scope, key themes and findings were discussed at various stages with the NMPCC and jurisdictional members of the Police Consultative Group on Missing Persons ('PCGMP'), as follows:

- in May 2019 fields to be included in the data collection form were workshopped at a face-to-face session of the Police Consultative Group on Missing Persons ('PCGMP') bi-annual forum;
- in November 2019 a synopsis of the key themes drawn from the literature review was presented to each jurisdiction's police service;
- in June 2020 an outline of the key findings of the statistical analysis was provided for discussion at the PCGMP bi-annual forum;
- throughout 2020 a series of ZOOM and conference calls were held to discuss the findings relevant to the national picture and to each jurisdiction; and
- in November 2020 a face-to-face presentation was given at the PCGMP bi-annual forum.

In 2020 the PCGMP determined to publicly release a national report into children and youth (aged 0-18 years) reported missing from OOHC in Australia.

THE DATA COLLECTION FORM

The data collection form was developed by the project team. It was based on the form initially developed by the NMPCC, and subsequently revised by the Australian Institute of Criminology (the 'AIC') which informed its analysis of missing person reports gathered between 2005-2011.²

This form required substantial revision in order to provide a specific focus on youth who went missing from OOHC as this field had not previously been collected. Fields to be included in the form were workshopped at a face-to-face meeting with the NMPCC and police representatives in 2019 and refined through subsequent email exchanges. A copy of the form is at [Appendix A](#).

PROVISION OF POLICE DATA

The PCGMP provided data relating to missing children and young people reports received in a 30-day period. To ensure the privacy of the individuals involved, the data collection period has not been specified in this report. Individual jurisdictions have also been anonymised as Jurisdiction 1 ('J1') through to Jurisdiction 8 ('J8'). Information from J8 was subsequently removed from analysis due to the limited sample size. Accordingly, the analysis in this report relates to data from seven Australian jurisdictions.

Data was provided to the project team by the NMPCC after being extracted by state and territory police from each jurisdiction's database of missing person reports. Police also manually reviewed the files of individuals reported as missing, and extracted information, if known, regarding their OOHC placement, demographic material, the missing experience and whether the missing youth was known to other divisions within that jurisdiction's police service. This material was then de-identified and entered into Excel spreadsheets by police before being provided to the project team.

The data also comprised free-text commentary in the form of a few lines or a paragraph, which was entered by police based on officers' interpretation of material contained in individual missing person files. This primarily constituted reasons why young people had gone missing, based on the missing person report made to police, or 'safe and well' interviews conducted with a young person on their return. Information regarding how and where a missing young person was located was also provided in free-text form. This commentary was reviewed and coded into themes by the project team and subsequently presented in table and/or graph form.

STATISTICAL METHODS

Data sets for missing persons were received from seven Australian jurisdictions. Individuals were classified for reporting by age as children (aged 12 years and under) and youth (aged 13 to 17 years, both inclusive). Data included both people in and not in Out-Of-Home Care (OOHC).

Data sets received by the statistician were de-identified. There were a number of types of information commonly included in the data sets:

- an identifier enabling missing episodes to be associated with an individual (i.e. a real or proxy missing person identifier),
- age,
- gender,

- ethnicity,
- care status (in or not in care),
- length of time missing and
- whether an individual who went missing had a history of going missing (designated as yes or no)).

Other types of information were included in the data, sometimes across several data sets. Not all data sets included all types of the above information and the quality and completeness of that information varied over the data sets.

Where blanks occurred in data, they were taken as meaning "unknown". Unknown details were also explicitly identified in the data sets by a variety of entries (e.g. Unknown, UNK, NA, N/A, ??). In all cases, these were replaced by "not recorded". Other information was recorded differently across data sets; for example, female appeared as Female, FEMALE or F and sometimes more than one variant appeared in the one data set.

A particular difficulty was posed by not all data sets including an identifier that enabled individuals to be distinguished in the data. In some data sets where an identifier was included, there were blank entries against reports. This meant it was not possible to determine how many individuals were involved across those reports. As a result, it was not possible to accurately determine how many individuals were involved in all the reports for the 30-day reporting period.

Some data sets were manually edited after being extracted from the relevant police data base and before being passed on to the researcher. This editing sometimes introduced errors.

Data sets were cleaned to re-code blanks as "Not recorded", remove inconsistencies in the information types needed for reports and correct other errors. The data was then used to provide descriptive reports summarising the characteristics of reported instances of missingness and, to the extent possible, individuals who went missing during the month-long reporting period.

The statistical summaries produced were in the form of cross-tabulations, with corresponding graphs, for various characteristics of missingness. Some limited modelling to determine associations between various characteristics (example, gender and OOHC status) was undertaken using Pearson's chi-squared test. Factors that may predict the number of times an individual went missing during the

month were also investigated, using a regression model for count data (specifically, a Poisson or negative binomial generalised linear model). In all cases, model assumptions were checked and judged as satisfied. This modelling was undertaken for some individual jurisdictions only.

All statistical analysis was done using the software package, *R*.³

All graphs were made using the R package, *ggplot2*.⁴

Data manipulation was undertaken with the R package, *dplyr*.⁵

VIGNETTES

Some of the common attributes and issues affecting youth missing from OOHC have been illustrated through a selection of eight (8) case studies or ‘vignettes’. These have been selected as representative of the common aspects of the OOHC missing experience as identified in the police data and in the literature, and do not constitute atypical or outlier experiences.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Given the specific focus on the OOHC environment in the project brief, literature concerning conditions, policies, experiences, monitoring and regulation of the Australian OOHC system was examined in detail. This involved an analysis of reports produced by bodies including Commissions, Guardians and Advocates for Children and Young People; Offices of the Ombudsman and Auditor General; Law Reform Commissions; Sentencing Councils, the Productivity Commission, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare; the NSW Bureau of Crimes Statistics and Research; NSW Legal Aid and the Victorian Legal Aid Commission, among others.

Literature published in related or overlapping fields relevant to the missing experience was also reviewed in order to understand the possible reasons for and consequences of youth going missing from care. Concerns such as the impact of homelessness, involvement in the criminal justice system, victimisation through Commercial Child Exploitation, Commercial Sexual Exploitation, Human Trafficking, participation in organised crime and gang involvement including the ‘county lines’ phenomenon and historic child removal practices, were examined. The reports and commentary published by the United Nations’ Special Rapporteur’s on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography; the Independent Expert for the UN Secretary-General on Violence Against Children; and the Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA); as well as

reports produced by global alliances and campaigns such as Missing People Europe and ECPAT (End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography and the Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes), provided insight into the international, cross-border issues that can impact missing youth.

Australian examination of these issues, such as those contained in Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC) publications from the early 1990s on prostitution, the late 1990s on the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children, and more recently, in publications on Forced Marriage and Organised Gangs, revealed a pronounced lack of attention paid to the overlap between these issues and the circumstances and experiences of missing youth in general, and youth in OOHC in particular.

Terms and search engines

Search terms included: Missing, runaway, throwaway, absconding, absent, AWOL, self-placing, location unknown, authorised absence, elopement, 'lost' children, homelessness, street children and rough sleepers; Out-Of-Home-Care, care-experienced, looked-after children, alternate care, substitute care, institutional care, residential care, foster care, kinship care, group-homes, unregulated accommodation, and semi-independent accommodation.

These terms were run through various search engines and databases including: CINCH; Austlii; APAIS; UK Police Library; Global Library; ProQuest; EBSCOhost; ERIC; Social Care Institute for Excellence; Child Welfare Information Gateway; the Californian Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare; the Youth Justice Board's Effective Practice Library, Google and Google Scholar.

LIMITATIONS OF THE PROJECT

Data quality was variable

Data quality was highly variable and impacted on the study's ability to provide a uniform, national picture of children and youth missing from OOHC in Australia. As has been previously identified in similar studies, these data issues concerned 'inconsistency in definitions of key data items, jurisdictional differences in data recording practices and jurisdictional variation in the data items recorded or provided to the study'.⁶ The discrepancies in both the information collected and how it was interpreted by police substantially restricted the types of analyses that could be conducted and limited much of the study to basic descriptive statistics.

Exclusion of jurisdictional data

At the commencement of the study period one jurisdiction (J8) was in the process of implementing a new intelligence computer system which would allow for the option of a person reported 'absent' to be recorded. Although manual data was extracted and provided by J8, the limited information able to be provided led to one jurisdiction's information being excluded from analysis.

It was not possible to give an accurate estimate of the number of individual children and youths involved in the missing person episodes, as the data from some jurisdictions did not allow individuals to be distinguished. The percentages shown have been based on the total minimum number of individuals able to be distinguished.

Accordingly, the national picture presented in this report should be considered as a significant under-estimation of the reports of the incidence of the missing experience, and the number of individuals and episodes should be regarded as a conservative estimate.

30-day data collection period

The statistical summaries provided should be interpreted with some caution because of the very narrow window from which the data was obtained. This caveat applies in particular to the modelling results, which should be considered suggestive only. Data spanning a longer period of time would provide a more certain picture of the network of factors surrounding OOHC.

For such a picture to be obtained, however, effort needs to be applied to improving the quality and consistency of data collection and recording through training staff in good data management practice and in investing in database design, particularly in relation to data validation.

Restrictions of the thematic analysis

The thematic analysis was limited by the level of detail in the information provided by police. For example, information regarding OOHC providers, including whether placements were provided by the state, non-government agencies or for-profit care agencies, was not provided. Nor was information regarding whether placements were managed by Indigenous-run and controlled entities, or if they employed Indigenous or CALD staff and carers. No information was available regarding the length of time that youth had been in the particular placement from which they had been reported missing. Similarly, a lack of detail regarding the size of these placements, number of residents, staffing ratios, or care home regimes limited the project team's ability to explore this issue further.

Proviso

None of the above are complaints about the quality of police data in this field. Police collect information for their own unique operational purposes, and not for the purposes of carrying out detailed studies like this into, as in this instance, the children and young people in the care of another government department. A detailed study of the phenomenon of young people missing from OOHC would require data from multiple agencies.

DEFINITIONS

There are a multitude of terms used in the literature to refer to children and young who are reported missing. This report has adopted the terminology used in the original literature, which reflects the practices and common lexicon of its particular jurisdiction. Changes to the terminology used have not been made, apart from those thought necessary to improve readability for an Australian audience. For example: the English term 'Local Authority' was replaced with the more familiar Australian terms 'child welfare department' or 'Out-Of-Home Care ('OOHC'); and the acronym 'AWOL' (Absent Without Leave), which is favoured by organisations such as the United States Vera Institute, was replaced with the term 'missing'.

Absconder

A term historically used to describe a young person who went missing from an institutional setting such as a child welfare facility, mental health institution or school. It is still in common use in some Australian jurisdictions, despite pejorative connotations that likens the act of going missing with a criminal activity. It has been retained in this document where it was necessary for historical accuracy.

Absent

A term used to record persons whose whereabouts are unknown, but whose circumstances indicate there are no serious concerns for either their safety or welfare. It is commonly used in relation to young people missing from OOHC.

Adult

An adult is any person aged 18 years and over. This is consistent with the definition used by the National Missing Persons Coordination Centre.

Child

A child is any person aged 0-12 years of age (inclusive). This definition is used by the National Missing Persons Coordination Centre.

CALD (Culturally and Linguistically Diverse)

The acronym 'CALD' (Culturally and Linguistically Diverse) has been used instead of naming specific ethnicities due to the risk of identification of individuals arising from the small sample sizes. It is noted that the original data provided by police contained various terminology, and in some cases, a quite

detailed analysis of various ethnicities. Comparisons across jurisdictions on this indicator is not recommended, given the divergent measures used to classify someone as CALD. This included language spoken at home, racial appearance and country of birth, all of which contain their own limitations and inadequacies.

Terms used in the original literature (such as 'Ethnicity', 'Ethnic', and 'Black and Minority Ethnic' (BAME or BME) have been retained.

Gender

The terms 'male' 'boy' and 'young man' are used interchangeably, as are the terms 'female', 'girl', and 'young woman'. All of the statistical data provided by police referred to 'males' or 'females', with one exception.

Indigenous

For consistency, 'Indigenous' has been used to refer to First Nations or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. 'Indigeneity' has been used to refer to identification as an Indigenous person.

An individual was classified as 'Indigenous' across all missing episodes if there a single positive identification made in the data supplied by police.

The term 'indigenous' has been used to refer to First Nations people from non-Australian jurisdictions, to easily distinguish between jurisdictions.

LGBTQI (Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex)

The acronym LGBTQI is used throughout the report to refer to Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex youth. The terms 'homosexuality', 'nonconforming' and non-binary have been retained where used in the original literature.

Missing Person

The National Missing Persons Co-ordination Centre defines a missing person as 'Anyone who is reported missing to police, whose whereabouts are unknown, and there are fears for the safety or concern for the welfare of that person'.⁷ A **voluntary** missing person is defined as someone who has control over their actions, who has decided on a course of action and whose absence is not suspicious. A runaway child is generally described by this term. An **involuntary** missing person is defined as

someone who is suspected to have gone missing in unusual or suspicious circumstances, or against their will, and who may be the subject of a serious crime, such as abduction.

Non-Care

The term 'non-care' has been used to refer to an individual who has not been identified as being in OOHC (Out-Of-Home Care).

OOHC (Out-Of-Home Care)

The acronym OOHC has also been used throughout this paper to denote the system of care provided to children and young people by the state and non-government agencies. OOHC is defined as overnight care for children and young people aged under 18 who do not live with their families. This may be due to child protection concerns, or because their families are unable to care for them due to parental death, ill-health, mental illness, disability or some form of incapacity.

OOHC includes placements with agencies approved by child protection departments in respective Australian jurisdictions, for which there is ongoing case management and financial payment. It includes legal (court-ordered) and voluntary placements, as well as placements made for the purpose of providing respite for parents and/or carers.⁸ OOHC does not include:

- placements for children on third-party parental responsibility orders
- placements for children on immigration orders
- supported placements for those aged 18 or over
- pre-adoptive placements and placements for children whose adoptive parents receive ongoing funding due to the support needs of the child
- placements to which a child enters and exits on the same day
- placements solely funded by disability services, psychiatric services, specialist homelessness services, juvenile justice facilities, or overnight childcare services; and
- cases in which a child self-places without approval by the department.

For readability and to avoid repetition, the terms 'care' and 'care-experienced' have been used interchangeably with OOHC. Determining whether an individual was in 'Care' was based on the identification provided by police in their respective datasets. An individual was classified as in 'Care' across all missing episodes if there a single positive identification made in the data.

Repeat missing

A repeat missing person is an individual for whom more than one missing person report was received by police during the 30-day data collection period. This term has been adopted in preference to the commonly used term 'recidivist'.

Youth

A youth is any person aged between 13 to 17 years of age inclusive. This definition is used by the National Missing Persons Coordination Centre.

SCOPE OF THE REPORT

Part 1 presents the results of the analysis of data supplied by Australian State and Territory police services regarding 1171 individuals and 3009 episodes involving children and young people reported missing during a 30-day period in 2019.

Part 2 outlines some of the individual characteristics of children and young people who were reported missing in the 30-day data collection period. These include age, gender, race/ethnicity or cultural identity and Indigeneity, sexual identity, disability, mental health and substance use.

Part 3 examines a particular challenge for police services and carers: youth aged 13-17 years who repeatedly go missing from OOHC.

Part 4 discusses the push and pull factors that lead to young people go missing from OOHC. It presents a thematic analysis of the reasons for going missing that were attributed to young people reported missing from OOHC in the 30-day data collection period.

Part 5 describes the factors specific to the OOHC environment that lead young people to go missing from care.

Part 6 presents a thematic analysis of the pattern of missing episodes identified in the Australian police data. This includes how youth went missing, the length of missing episodes, the number of missing episodes, and how and where missing youth were located.

Part 7 discusses the risks of going missing and young people's experiences while missing. This analysis is presented alongside a review of international and domestic academic and grey literature which provide further insight into the incidence, motivations, and experiences of children and young people who go missing from OOHC.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PART 1: YOUNG PEOPLE MISSING FROM OOHC

- Internationally, literature on youth missing from OOHC has influenced government policy and agency practice.
- In contrast, there is little Australian research on youth missing from OOHC.
- There are approximately 44,900 children and young people under 18 years of age living in OOHC, which equates to under one percent of all young people in Australia.
- Young people in OOHC made up 53 percent of all young people reported missing and were responsible for 77 percent of missing episodes in this study.

PART 2: DEMOGRAPHICS OF YOUNG PEOPLE MISSING FROM OOHC

Age

- The peak age for going missing for both males and females was 14 years of age.
- Almost 40 percent of the children reported missing were just 12 years of age.
- There was no significant difference between the OOHC cohort and the non-care group for either children or youth.

Gender

- Over half the youth reported missing in this study were female.
- In a departure from the literature, almost 62 percent of the children reported missing were male.

Ethnicity and Indigeneity

- Data relating to ethnicity was unavailable for almost a third of children and young people.
- Where ethnicity was recorded, the vast majority (70 percent) of young people were Caucasian.
- Indigenous children comprised over a quarter of missing children, and 18 percent of missing youth.
- Those from a CALD background comprised almost nine percent of missing children and 13 percent of missing youth.
- Over one third (34.2 percent) of youth missing from OOHC were Indigenous, compared to nine percent of missing youth not in care.

PART 3: YOUTH WHO REPEATEDLY GO MISSING

- A history of going missing is a strong indication of future missing episodes.
- Almost 60 percent of all missing youth went missing more than once in this 30-day study.
- Youth missing from OOHC were disproportionately represented amongst those who repeatedly went missing.
- They comprised 54 percent of all missing individuals, but 70.5 percent of all repeat missing youth.
- Nationally, 77 percent of youth missing from OOHC went missing on more than one occasion during the month.
- Young people who repeatedly go missing from home or care should be regarded as particularly vulnerable.
- However, they are often viewed as 'street-wise', 'recalcitrant' or 'recidivist' youth who consume an unjustifiably large share of police resources.
- Given the high incidence of repeat missing persons, identifying why youth repeatedly go missing has the potential to reduce the victimisation of the young people involved, as well as providing intelligence on the activities of those exploiting young people.
- Finding ways to reduce the volume of these cases would significantly lessen service demands and costs on police agencies.

PART 4: THE REASONS YOUTH GO MISSING FROM OOHC

- Push factors' drive a young person to leave a placement: for example, to escape an unsafe or unsatisfactory situation.
- In contrast, 'pull factors' entice or attract a young person to leave. This might be the desire to see family or friends, or to return to a familiar neighbourhood or embark upon a promising relationship.
- There is significant overlap and interplay between the factors that lead to a person going missing.
- Aspects of young people's lives, including gender, ethnicity, Indigeneity and disability, cannot be separated from the historical, political and social environment in which they occur.
- It is the context of young people's lives, rather than just their individual demographics, that must be understood if the act of going missing is to be addressed.
- Consistent with the literature, young people commonly left care to be with their friends and or partners and family.

- Going missing was fuelled by the need to reconnect with important aspects of their life outside of the OOHC environment, to maintain relationships by checking in with family or friends for brief periods before returning to OOHC.
- Going missing can be expected when maturing young people's drive for independence and autonomy clashes with a restrictive and artificial environment that fails to meet their individual needs.
- Others visited 'street families' of friends and acquaintances for emotional support, material aid and protection. Some of these 'friends' included people they may have not known well or had just met, including adult males.

PART 5: THE OOHC ENVIRONMENT

- Young people in OOHC are most likely to go missing from group homes/residential placements.
- Unhappiness with the placement, feeling unsafe, being subjected to abuse from peers or adults, and a lack of support and services are factors that lead to missing events.
- This study indicated that some youth went missing from OOHC to seek safety and protection from an abusive or unsatisfactory placement. They complained they had been bullied or intimidated by carers, staff and other residents.
- Some youths went missing in circumstances that suggested they were attempting to avoid exploitation, and a small number left following allegations of involvement in criminal activity.

PART 6: THE PATTERN OF MISSING EPISODES

Identifying the 'power few' locations

- Youth in this study went missing from a 'power few' locations: in one jurisdiction three OOHC group homes accounted for 17 percent of all the jurisdiction's missing youth episodes.
- Multiple missing episodes from a small number of locations may indicate abuse or other failings in management or practice. Accordingly, attention should be focused on the facilities' environment and regimes to ensure the OOHC placement is safe and is meeting young people's needs.
- Understanding the dynamics of the 'power few' locations from which disproportionate numbers of youth go missing has the potential to reduce the incidence of missing episodes.

Youth in OOHC went missing more than other young people

- Children in OOHC went missing an average of 3.6 times in 30 days.
- In contrast, children not in care went missing an average of 1.3 times in 30 days.

- Youth in OOHC went missing more often than did the non-care cohort: as many as 20 times in 30 days.
- In contrast, young people not in care went missing far less: up to five times in 30 days.

Changing patterns of missing

- The literature suggests the pattern of missing is changing: a new trend of brief absences, often just a few hours, and often occurring in the day, has been identified.
- Internationally, this has been linked to the involvement of gangs, who criminally/sexually exploit young people in OOHC and advise them how to manage their absences to avoid coming to the attention of carers, staff or police.

Missing in company

- A number of children and youth in OOHC went missing in company, particularly with other family members.
- Some met up with other missing youth or returned to placements with them.
- The literature is mixed: this pattern can reflect young people's desire to be with family, especially siblings; may indicate peer pressure to go missing; may suggest a network of supportive friends is being developed; or may constitute a 'red flag' for exploitation and abuse.

Locating missing youth

- All children and young people were located alive.
- Most young people were located within 1-3 days.
- The majority of missing episodes concluded when the young person voluntarily returned to their home or placement.
- Others ended when police/transport officers, or carers, located missing youth.
- There was a notable pattern whereby young people themselves contacted police or carers to return them to their placement, or to advise that they were OK.

PART 7: EXPERIENCES WHILE MISSING

- The risk that significant harm will befall a young person while they are missing is relatively low.
- However, emerging literature indicates youth are likely to experience secondary victimization while missing.
- Young people missing in OOHC however are particularly vulnerable to exploitation.
- Going missing should be seen as an indicator that a child might be in considerable danger.

- Although police policies and practices acknowledged the vulnerability of youth missing from OOHC, there was a lack of reliable data in the current study about young people's experiences while they were missing.
- There are potentially adverse consequences for vulnerable youth if police do not possess sufficient understanding of the issues impacting young people in OOHC.
- The current study indicated that Australian jurisdictions adopted varying definitions of vulnerability based on age and/or individual assessments of risk.
- Young people in OOHC were not automatically or uniformly regarded as vulnerable when they were reported missing.

The importance of Safe and Well checks and Return Home Interviews

- Safe and Well check and/or Return Home Interviews with young people is considered crucial to identify urgent support such as medical attention, ensure that a child is safe, and to identify support needed to prevent them going missing again.
- The current study suggested that these checks were often not being undertaken.
- The quality of the information gained when checks were done was often suspect. Youth who had experienced harm while missing were often described as 'safe and well' or as 'nil concerns'.

Youth were exposed to harm

- Analysis of police data from the 30-day collection period indicated that some young people had been exposed to harm while missing.
- Children returned home intoxicated, dirty and dishevelled, drug-affected or very late at night.
- Under-age girls were returned to their care homes by unknown adult 'boyfriends', were located hiding in the homes of adult males, or associating with groups of older youths 'known to police'.
- Other young people had returned exhibiting serious mental health issues, unexplained physical injuries or reporting they had been assaulted.
- Some youth had been involved in criminal activity.

PART 1: CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE MISSING FROM OOHC

CONTEXT

Australia

Over 40,000 missing person reports were made in Australia in 2015. Nationally, this equates to 168 reports per 100,000 population. Almost half (49 percent) of missing person reports involved young people aged 13-17 years.⁹

Young people in OOHC

Approximately 44,900 children and young people live in Out-Of-Home Care ('OOHC') in Australia.¹ It has been estimated that each year, close to five percent of young people in OOHC are reported to have absconded, self-placed or gone missing.¹⁰

Variable definitions, inconsistent policies and a lack of 'reliable, comparable cross-jurisdictional data'¹¹ have meant there is no national picture of young people missing from OOHC.

Australian missing person research has provided important insights into the prevalence, nature and impact of missing person events, sought to identify at-risk groups, explored best practice across the fields of prevention, early intervention, referral processes and support services, and discussed the risk factors and predictors of missing episodes. However, this research has tended to exclude a specific focus on youth in OOHC.^{2 3}

¹ Eighty percent of the young people in OOHC have lived in care continuously for one year or more. Of these, 29 percent have been in OOHC for two to five years, and 38 percent have been in OOHC for five years or more. Only 20 percent of children have lived in care for less than 12 months. Indigenous children are over-represented: approximately one in every 18 Indigenous children are in OOHC, which is over 10 times the rate for non-Indigenous children. Almost one-third of young people in OOHC are aged 10–14, and just over half are male. Approximately six percent live in group homes or residential care. Of the remaining 92 percent, over half live in home-based care such as relative or kinship placements, 39 percent in foster care, and one percent in other types of home-based care.

² For example, in 1998 the National Missing Persons Unit (NMPU) commissioned an independent study of missing people in Australia in order to identify service delivery needs. The report, which comprised an analysis of Australian police statistics, a survey of families and friends of 270 people reported missing to police and consultations with over 90 organisations with an interest in missing person issues, excluded people going missing from youth supervised care or detention facilities, although the authors noted that this group comprised a significant proportion of missing person reports (Henderson, M., and Henderson, P. (1998) *Missing People. Issues for the Australian Community*. Australian Bureau of Criminal Intelligence. Canberra. Australia)

³ A report commissioned by the Australian Federal Police National Missing Person Coordination Centre from the AIC based on missing person statistics provided by state and territory police did not include data on the prevalence or experiences of children and young people from OOHC who were reported missing. The authors cited international research suggesting that young people in OOHC are more likely to go missing than youth in family

A significant study that did include examination of the OOHC cohort was undertaken by James et al., (2008).¹² It identified that among juvenile absconders in South Australia, almost one-third had been reported missing from a child welfare department assessment unit. Data from New South Wales similarly revealed that one-third of all young people reported missing were in the care of the child welfare department. Citing international literature on the prevalence of youth in OOHC in missing populations, the authors concluded that the OOHC cohort had a greater likelihood of repeatedly going missing, and that the triggers underlying an episode of a young person running away from foster care or a group home differed from the reasons young people ran away from their own homes. Despite their small numbers, youth who ran away from care were found to consume a disproportionate amount of police time and effort.

The Victorian Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) Centre for Human Services Research and Evaluation's literature review into children and young people missing from OOHC (2017)¹³ is the only Australian study exclusively focused on young people who go missing from OOHC.⁴ It concluded that the literature:

- adopted various and at times conflicting definitions in relation to 'missing' (such as 'absconding', 'self-placed', 'running away', 'location unknown', 'absent' or 'elope');
- often compared the reasons youth go missing from family homes to the reasons youth go missing from care placements, resulting in limited understanding about those who go missing from out-of-home care;¹⁴
- predominantly comprised research into residential or foster care placements, such that very little is known about youth who go missing from kinship care; and
- consisted of a 'limited' evidence base about the risk factors and characteristics of youth who go missing from care; and
- failed to examine risk factors specific to Aboriginal youth who go missing from OOHC placements.

homes. (Bricknell S., and Renshaw, L. (2016) Missing persons in Australia 2008-2015. Statistical Bulletin 01. Australian Institute of Criminology. Canberra. Australia; Bricknell, S. (2017) Missing persons: who is at risk. Research report 08. Australian Institute of Criminology. Canberra:14 p27 <https://aic.gov.au/publications/rr/rr8>

⁴The review assessed 34 articles identified by the Victorian Government Library Service, supplemented by findings from grey literature. It featured predominantly US academic studies, with limited discussion of the substantial amount of international material relating to missing youth produced by government, non-government organisations and charities in other jurisdictions.

The DHHS review determined that knowledge about the relationships between risk factors, and whether multiple risk factors increase risk proportionally, is scarce. For example, it was unable to locate specific strategies for particular age groups or gender types, and could find no evidence regarding culturally appropriate interventions that could be considered in the development of strategies to support young Aboriginal people.

It highlighted the cumulative nature of harm to young people over time from being missing but concluded that there was no consistent pattern of behaviours or experiences that result in children going missing from care. It determined that little is known about effective practice to prevent, reduce and respond to young people who go missing from OOHC.

Measuring 'absconders'

One of the most significant barriers to understanding the prevalence of the OOHC cohort in missing youth figures, is an historic confusion over whether to regard as 'missing' young people who ran away from the care or custody of government or voluntary institutions after being placed in a remand centre, institution, hostel or residential program.¹⁵ The distinction between youth missing from their own home and those missing from an institution has been described as fundamental to missing persons data collation. Most jurisdictions distinguished between these two groups in practice, on the basis that 'institutional absconders are not missing persons in the narrow sense of the term.'¹⁶

Juvenile institutional absconders constituted an enormous operational and administrative load for police. In 1985, they comprised between 16 and 40 percent of missing person reports in all jurisdictions in Australia.¹⁷ In 2008, they made up three quarters of all missing youth incidents in the Australian Capital Territory⁵ and comprised a third of all missing person incidents in South Australia. Analysis of police missing person data from 2011-2015 indicated that 11 percent of missing youth reports in Queensland, 36 percent of the missing person population in South Australia, and 81 percent of the missing population in the ACT, were absconders.¹⁸

Measuring 'current clients of the Department of Health and Human Services'

Another way of measuring the prevalence of reports concerning young people missing from OOHC is seen in the contemporary Victorian police practice of recording whether the subject of a missing person report is a current client of the Department of Health and Human Services. Someone in this category is automatically regarded as being at significant risk.

⁵ An absconder was defined as someone reported missing from juvenile care, a mental health institution or school.

Using this measure, over 33 percent of missing person reports made between 2011-2015 involved a young person in OOHC.¹⁹

The indicator is however, an inaccurate assessment of care status and should not be regarded as a proxy for youth who go missing from OOHC. This is because the category applies to adults missing from various forms of institutional care, such as mental health and aged care homes, as well as to children and young people, some of whom might not be in OOHC.

Measuring 'absent from care'

Inadequate assessments of the vulnerability of missing youth have been fostered by the development of a dual categorisation process that distinguishes between youth who are 'Missing' and those who are 'Absent'.

In Australia, a 'missing' person is anyone reported to police, whose whereabouts are unknown, and where there are fears for the safety or concern for the welfare of that person.²⁰ In contrast, 'Absent' is a term generally used when a person's whereabouts are unknown, in circumstances where there are no serious concerns for either their safety or welfare.

Whereas young people not in care are invariably described as 'missing' from their family home, the literature indicates that the term 'Absent' is almost exclusively applied to young people in OOHC, including in situations where the reporter could have no definite knowledge of the whereabouts of the child or the specific circumstances of the missing event.^{21 22 23 24 25}

The potential that vulnerable youth in OOHC will receive a less robust police response because they are deemed to be Absent rather than genuinely missing, has been identified as a real concern in the UK.⁶

⁶ For example, the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults identified that at least 10,000 children a year had been classed as merely 'absent'; that these children were effectively 'off the radar' in 21,339 missing incidents; that children in OOHC who were reported as 'absent' had been placed at an increased risk of exploitation by adults for sex and criminal activity such as running drugs across county lines; and that police call handlers had been put under pressure from superiors to classify children as 'absent' and not missing. The APPG concluded that the absent category was not fit for purpose and should be scrapped, declaring that it had turned out to be a blunt, crude assessment tool that left children at risk. It recommended that all children should receive a risk-based response based on a new system of low, medium and high risk, but emphasised that no child was to be classified as low risk unless the police and children's services had undertaken a joint assessment of risk.

England and Wales

The literature from England and Wales suggests that youth living in OOHC are more likely to go missing than young people living with their natural families.²⁶ Government publications state that children in care are three times more likely to run away than other children.²⁷ Studies have variously found that:

- One in four missing children reports involve young people in OOHC;²⁸
- While less than one percent of all children and young people are in OOHC, ‘around 30 per cent of all runaways reported to the police were found to be missing from care placements, the majority of them from residential care;’²⁹ and
- 38 percent of young people reported missing from care in Wales go missing repeatedly.³⁰

A recent study attempted to give some context to the figures. An examination by Sidebottom et.al (2019) of missing person reports over a 12-month period in one police command found 43.7 percent involved a young person in OOHC. To put this figure into context, the authors noted that nationally, there were just over 69,000 children in local authority care in 2015. While this equated to a national rate of approximately 60 children in care per 10,000 children, [t]he same rate using our data on missing children is **4732 per 10,000 children**³¹. (my emphasis)

The United States

In the United States, young people are reported missing at a rate approximately six times the national average.³²

Much of the literature on missing youth is based on studies of runaways in shelter or street populations, probably because these populations have been more accessible to researchers than have young people in the OOHC system. These studies have reported relatively small samples of young people in OOHC, ranging between three percent to 18 percent.³³

Studies focusing on young people in OOHC who then run away or go missing however, report much higher numbers, including of young people repeatedly going missing. ‘Both of these lenses are valid and important in understanding the scope of the problem’.³⁴

According to US Department of Health and Human Services data from 2010, at least two percent of young people in OOHC ran away at least once in a twelve-month period. The vast majority were under

twelve years of age.³⁵ In both 2016³⁶ and 2017,³⁷ approximately one percent of the close to 450,000 young people in care were absent from their placement after having run away.

Criticisms of counting measures

Critics have suggested that point of time measurements grossly under-estimate the number of young people who have gone missing from care, by only counting those who are absent from their placement on a particular date, rather than youth who ran away at some other point during the year.

Self-report data indicate that between 15 – 46 percent of young people in care run away at least once, and many do so multiple times.³⁸ Overall, young people in OOHC are thought to constitute between 13-18 percent of the entire youth runaway population.

It is also important to identify the extent of missing person episodes, as well as to understand the impact of individual missing youth, both to support the need for better prevention and a reduction of missing person episodes, and for economic considerations.³⁹ Responding to missing persons reports equates to 14 percent of police time in England.⁴⁰ Australian police have noted the frequency of requests to search for repeat missing persons, particularly those missing from OOHC.^{41 42}

The literature relating to the number of reports of young people missing from OOHC suggests that the OOHC cohort is strongly overrepresented in missing person reports: a recent English study found youth in OOHC made up 44.9 per cent of all incidents.⁴³ Institutional locations, such as OOHC facilities, account for a significant number of all reports.⁴⁴

As in Australia and the UK, variations in the figures cited in the literature have been attributed to differences in how running away or going missing is defined, whether figures are drawn from lifetime prevalence or point-in-time analysis, the sampling procedures used, and the jurisdictions in which the studies are conducted.⁴⁵

A lack of awareness of the issue among agencies and police, inconsistent definitions, inadequate data collection, and poor record management, also severely limit accurate identification of children missing in care.⁴⁶ In Australia overall, the prevalence of young people going missing from OOHC is poorly understood, in part because of differences in policies and practice, definitions of going missing, and the way it is measured.⁴⁷ Yet even in the absence of precise figures:

'the disappearance from care placements...contributed to a third of [missing person] reports' [and the cohort is] 'not just vulnerable to the consequences of going missing but vulnerable to the propensity, intentional or unintentional, to go missing'.⁴⁸

THE CURRENT STUDY

Individuals reported missing

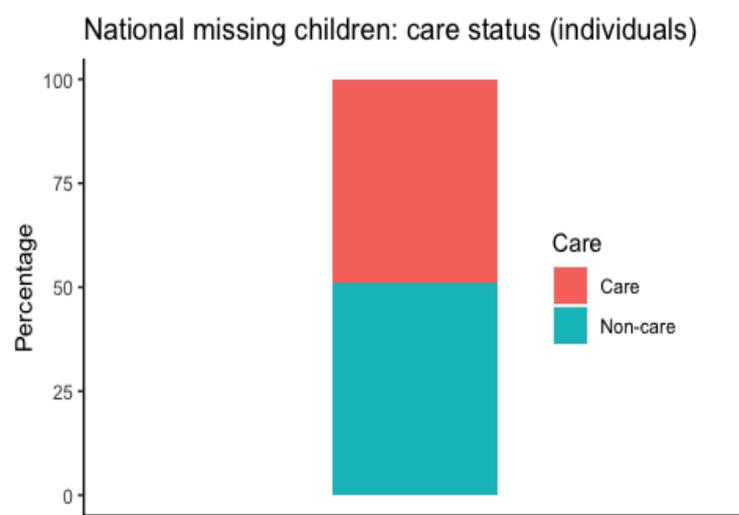
Information relating to individuals reported missing to police in the 30-day data collection period was provided by five jurisdictions (J1, J2, J3, J6 and J7). In total, 1171 children and young people (0-18 years) were reported missing in this period.

Children (aged 0-12 years)

227 children were reported missing during the 30-day data collection period.

Children missing from OOHC

Of these, 49 percent, or 111 children, were in OOHC.



Care_status	n_indiv	pc_indiv
Care	111	48.9
Non-care	116	51.1

Jurisdictional analysis

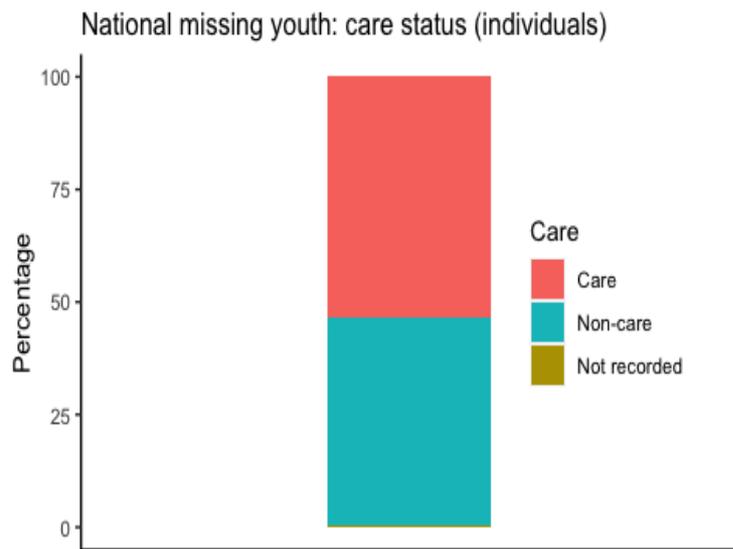
There was considerable variability: the OOHC cohort comprised almost 82 percent of children reported missing in J1, but just 25 percent of all children reported missing in J6 and J7.

Youth (aged 13-17 years inclusive)

944 individual youths were reported missing during the 30-day period.

Youth missing from OOHC

Of these, 54 percent, or 506 youths, were in OOHC.⁷



Care_status	n_indiv	pc_indiv
Care	506	53.6
Non-care	436	46.2
Not recorded	2	0.2

Jurisdictional analysis

There was considerable variability: the OOHC cohort comprised the majority of youth reported missing in J1 (67 percent), J2 (52 percent), and J3 (66 percent), but a minority of youth reported missing in J6 (38 percent) and J7 (23 percent).

⁷ This is an under-report. It is based on excluding all reports with no individual identified and calculating the percentage of identifiable individuals in OOHC. A very small number (n=2) had no care status recorded at all.

Missing episodes

Information relating to missing episodes for the 30-day data collection period was provided by five jurisdictions (J1, J2, J3, J5 and J6). In total, 3009 missing episodes involving children and young people (0-18 years) were identified in this period.

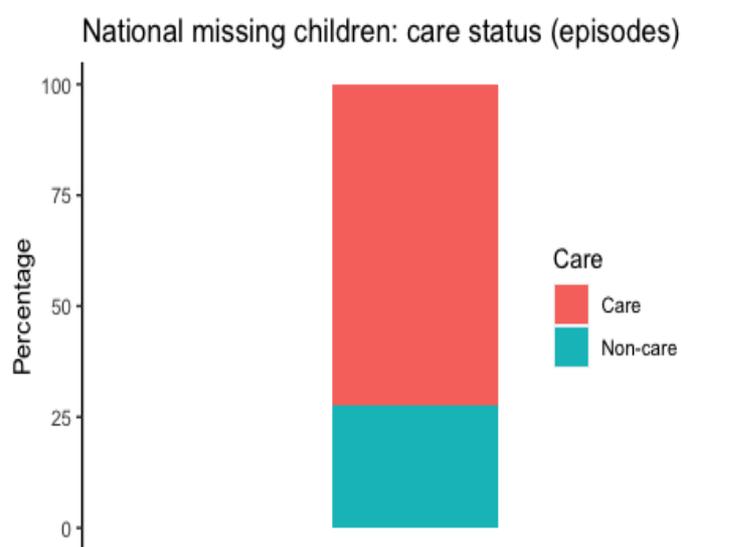
Children (aged 0-12 years)

There were 553 missing episodes involving children under 13 years of age.

Children missing from OOHC

The vast majority (n=401) of missing children reports involved children in OOHC.

In other words, 72.5 percent of all missing episodes involved children missing from OOHC.



Care_status	n_epi	pc_epi
Care	401	72.5
Non-care	152	27.5

Jurisdictional analysis

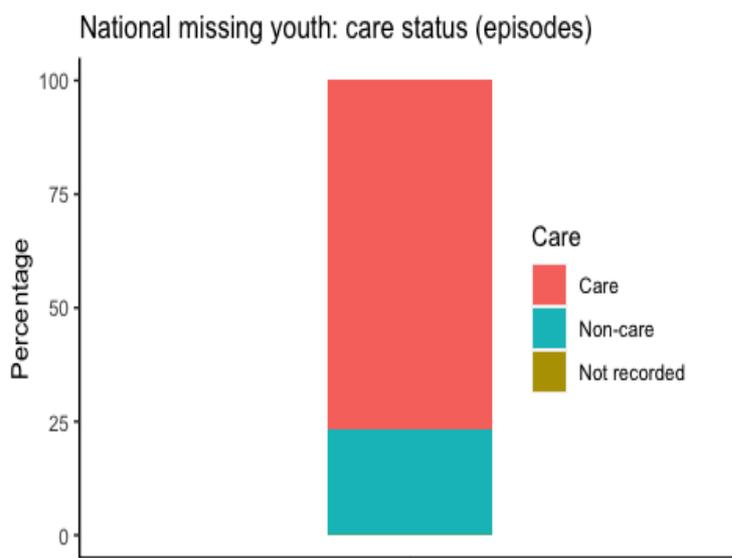
There was considerable variability: the OOHC cohort accounted for approximately a third of missing children episodes in J5 and J6, but over 90 percent in J1 and J3.

Youth (aged 13-17 inclusive)

Nationally, 2,456 missing episodes involving young people aged 13-17 years occurred in the 30-day collection period.

Youth missing from OOHC

77 percent (n=1889) of all missing episodes involved youth missing from OOHC.



Care_status	n_epi	pc_epi
Care	1889	76.9
Non-care	564	23.0
Not recorded	3	0.1

Jurisdictional analysis

An analysis of the data by jurisdictions indicates that episodes relating to youth missing from OOHC ranged from 43.8 percent (J6) to 90.6 percent (J3).

Youth missing from OOHC comprised the majority of all missing episodes in all jurisdictions except for J6 (which was 44 percent).

CHILDREN

NON-CARE

IN OOHC

MISSING 152 TIMES

MISSING 401 TIMES

5 EPISODES A DAY

13 EPISODES A DAY

27.5% OF ALL MISSING
EPISODES

72.5% OF ALL MISSING
EPISODES

YOUTH

NON-CARE

IN OOHC

MISSING 564 TIMES

MISSING 1889 TIMES

19 EPISODES A DAY

63 EPISODES A DAY

23% OF ALL MISSING EPISODES

77% OF ALL MISSING EPISODES

Missing children and youth as a percentage of the OOHC population

Another way of gauging the significance of the OOHC cohort is to compare its representation amongst those reported missing, to that of the OOHC population more generally. As the numbers of young people in OOHC nationally are not broken down by age, this section combines children and young people data (aged 0-18 years).

There were approximately 44,900 children and young people in OOHC at 30 June 2019,⁴⁹ comprising 0.8 percent of the national youth population.

	NATIONAL	ACT	NSW	NT	QLD	SA	TAS	VIC	WA
Number	44900	696	16884	1056	8125	3797	1104	8490	4754
Number per 1000	8	7.3	9.5	17	6.9	10.3	9.8	6	7.9

Table 1: Numbers and rates of children and young people in OOHC in Australia

There were 617 children and young people reported missing from OOHC in the current study.⁸ This equates to 1.7 percent of the national OOHC population.

Annualising this figure suggests that one in five young people in OOHC going missing in a year.

Youth reported missing from OOHC in the current study comprised between 0.5 percent (J6) to four percent (J3) of jurisdictions' OOHC populations.⁹

	NATIONAL	J1	J2	J3	J4	J5	J6	J7	J8
Percentage	1.7	2.3	2.7	4	-	2.7	0.5	1	-

Table 2: Percentage of children and young people missing from OOHC in the study by jurisdiction

⁸ These figures are based on the minimum number of individuals, determined by excluding all reports with no individual identified, as described above, and calculating the percentage of distinguishable individuals in OOHC.

⁹ The national figure for youth missing from OOHC is heavily qualified: both as the AIHW figures are collected at a specific point of time and may not reflect the actual number of individuals in OOHC during the entire month. Further, two jurisdictions were able to provide data on individuals for this analysis.

An examination of the OOHC cohort in one jurisdiction

Jurisdiction 3 provided data in respect of *all* individuals (children, youth and adults) reported missing during the 30-day collection period. Although caution should be taken not to generalise the findings from a single jurisdiction to the broader national study, this data indicates the importance of accurately identifying OOHC experience.

Missing individuals

460 individuals went missing in J3 in the 30-day period.

The OOHC cohort was disproportionately represented amongst those reported missing, with 33 percent (n=151) of the 460 individuals.¹⁰

	OOHC	Non-care	All individuals
Children	39	16	55
Youth	112	57	169
Adults	-	-	236
TOTAL	151	73	460

Table 3: Number of individuals reported missing

Missing episodes

The OOHC cohort was also disproportionately represented in the number of missing episodes that were reported: almost 69 percent (n=816) of the 1189 episodes involved children and young people in OOHC.

	OOHC	Non-care	All episodes
Children	207	18	225
Youth	609	63	672
Adults	-	-	292
TOTAL	816	81	1189

Table 4: Number of missing episodes

¹⁰ This is based on an assumption that none of the adults reported missing in this period had ever been in OOHC. It is therefore likely to be an under-reporting of the care experience. While the literature is very limited on the OOHC background of missing adults, Biehal et.al's 2003 study *Lost from view: Missing persons in the UK*, indicates that at least one respondent had continued going missing into adulthood.

PART 2: DEMOGRAPHICS OF YOUNG PEOPLE MISSING FROM OOHC

This section discusses some of the key demographic information for missing children and youth, drawn from the analysis of Australian police data collected during a 30-day period in 2019.

Differences exist between the OOHC and non-care cohorts have been noted where relevant. This analysis is presented alongside the international and domestic literature (both academic and 'grey' literature) and consistencies and discrepancies are discussed.

AGE

CONTEXT

Children aged 0-12

While going missing by children is commonly regarded as a rare event, they do appear in run-away or missing populations. For example:

- In England, the Children's Society⁵⁰ found that one percent of youth who ran away 10 times or more had first gone missing when they were under eight years of age;
- A self-report study conducted by the same agency later found that around one in four runaways ran for the first time before the age of 11⁵¹
- The United States NISMART data also included a small group of runaways under 12 years of age.⁵²

Children missing from OOHC

Children in OOHC have been identified as particularly likely to go missing. For example:

- In Australia, Wilson⁵³ identified that children as young as six had gone missing from OOHC placements;
- An English study of young people in children's homes found that younger children constituted a substantial minority' of runaways⁵⁴
- A study of youth who ran away from OOHC in the USA and Canada⁵⁵ found children as young as six years amongst the cohort. These children were 'much less likely to have a history of elopement or to exhibit ideation involving escape from their present living situation compared to adolescents', but those who did go missing had greater issues with school attendance, substance abuse, and delinquency;
- Data from the US Department of Health and Human Services has also indicated that the vast majority of the young people who ran away from OOHC at least once in a twelve-month period were under twelve years of age.⁵⁶

Youth aged 13-17 years

Mid-adolescence however, is consistently identified as a risk factor for going missing, with a series of studies concluding that older children are more likely to run away than younger children.^{57 58 59 60 61 62}

There is some discrepancy in the precise ages most likely to go missing. For example, in the UK Biehal, Mitchell and Wade (2003)¹¹ found that young people aged 13 to 15 years made up the bulk of missing person reports, with rates peaking at 15 years, and then declining.⁶³ However, in the USA, the NISMART¹² indicated that 15–17-year-olds were most at risk of being reported missing.⁶⁴

Other than jurisdictional or cultural differences between the UK and USA, a possible explanation for the discrepancy is the OOHC experience itself: it is possible that the OOHC cohort were more likely to go missing at a younger age than the general runaway population reflected in the NISMART data.

A recent study by Latzman et al., (2019)⁶⁵ found that the risk of going missing increased every year in age, but that the peak period for going missing was 14 to 16 years of age.

Cognitive and psychological development

It has been suggested that it is 'plausible that cognitive and psychosocial developments occurring in mid-adolescence may affect perceptions and judgement that heighten a young person's risk of going missing'.⁶⁶ Indeed, the literature often presents adolescence alone as a primary reason for young people's running away behaviour. For example, in the US literature, 'running away' is a term almost unique to adolescents: younger children are referred to as 'missing' or 'lost'. However, it has also been argued that 'developmental changes alone are not a satisfying explanation for [missing] activity. Most youth never run away, and most youth in foster care never go [missing]'.⁶⁷

Adolescent entry to OOHC

One explanation for the onset of missing behaviour amongst OOHC populations points to the additional complexities posed in the transition to adulthood, which is challenging under most circumstances, but which is thought to be particularly difficult for youth who have experienced abuse, neglect, or other problems with their families. It has also been suggested that youth in OOHC who go

¹¹ A linked series of studies by Biehal, Wade and others examined the specific situation of young people in OOHC in England and Wales, including the reasons they went missing, the risks they faced while missing, and the patterns or profiles of missing youth. They also interviewed young people who had gone missing from care, the first time that this perspective had been included in the English literature.

¹² Run by the US Department of Justice, Division of Juvenile Delinquency, the National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway and Thrownaway Children (NISMART)

missing have experienced emotional or psychological problems that began before they entered foster care, which manifested when they attained adolescence.

Entering care in adolescence has also been identified as a factor in missing episodes. For example, a cohort study conducted by the VERA Institute in the United States found that of those youth who first entered care as adolescents, 40 percent had at least one reported missing episode during their time in care.⁶⁸ Chapin Hall⁶⁹ researchers found that the odds of running away were higher for those who entered care when they were older than 13 years of age.

Resistance to authority and moves to independence

The tendency for older youth to resist parental or carers authority, as well as the greater likelihood that children this age will be involved in activities that bring them into conflict with their carers, has been suggested as an explanation for the high proportion of 15–17-year-olds amongst missing populations. Youth of this age are also often viewed by their carers as being capable of living on their own, another factor which may drive runaway episodes.⁷⁰

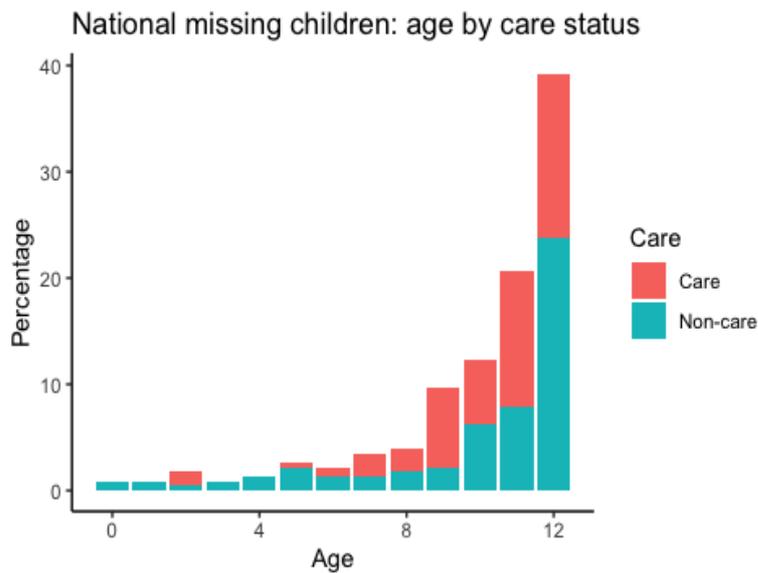
Continuation of existing missing patterns

Another explanation suggests going missing during care in adolescence is a continuation of a pattern of behaviour begun much earlier at home. This view is supported by research that has found that very young children appear in run-away or missing populations. For example, The Children's Society⁷¹ found that approximately one percent of young people who went missing 10 or more times from either home or OOHC, had run away for the first time before they were eight years of age.

THE CURRENT STUDY

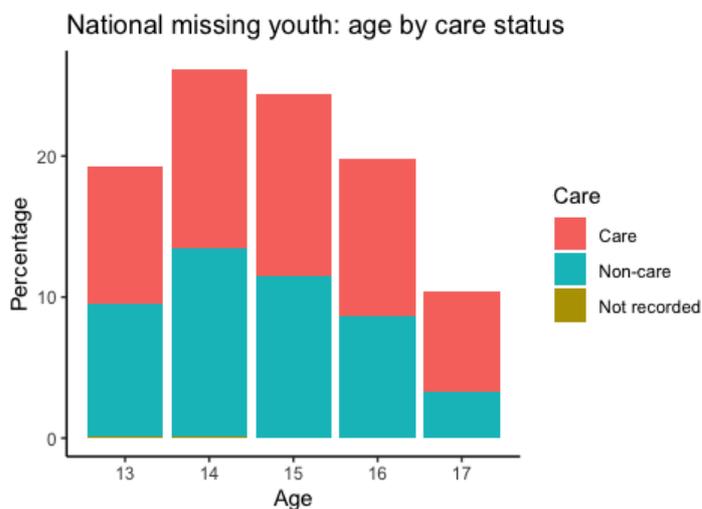
Children (aged 0-12 years)

Nationally, children most commonly went missing at 12 years of age. This age group comprised 39 percent (n=89) of all missing individuals. There were no significant differences between the OOHC and non-care groups.



Missing Youth (13-17 years)

However, the peak age for going missing for both males and females was 14 years of age. This was generally consistent with the literature. There was no statistical difference between the OOHC cohort and the non-care group, although youth in OOHC were about equally likely to go missing at 14 and at 15 years of age.



GENDER

CONTEXT

Females are more likely to go missing, including from OOHC, than males.^{72 73 74 75}

Noting that ‘the gender difference merits additional attention,⁷⁶ Chapin Hall researchers have postulated that services designed to prevent youth in care from running away are less effective for adolescent girls than adolescent boys, and that carers are more likely to report adolescent girls as missing than adolescent boys as girls are perceived as more vulnerable.

Others have suggested the prevalence of missing girls reflects the greater likelihood of females being sexually exploited and abused; a differential response to being separated from biological family; the likelihood of leaving with boyfriends; and the likelihood of having a caregiving role and/or concerns of abuse of other family members.⁷⁷

Research on the specific missing patterns of females is limited. The literature on female involvement in the criminal justice system, exploitation and homelessness sheds some light, although that research too is relatively sparse. This is significant, as going missing has been shown to be a risk factor both for female involvement in the justice system and in female re-offending.

Involvement in the criminal justice system

In Australia, females are less likely than males to enter the youth justice system and are much less likely to proceed to the most serious processes and outcomes. According to the Australian Institute for Health and Welfare (the ‘AIHW’) which has conducted one of the few national studies of girls in the criminal justice system:

‘young men were around twice as likely as young women to be proceeded against by police, more than 3 times as likely to be proven guilty in the Children’s Court, 4 times as likely to experience community-based supervision and 5 times as likely to be in detention’.⁷⁸

In 2018, girls made up less than 10 percent of the Australian youth detention population.⁷⁹

Indigenous girls are over-represented amongst the female population involved with the youth justice population. Nationally, Indigenous girls aged 10-17 are more likely than non-Indigenous girls to be involved in each stage of the juvenile justice system, whether that is being found guilty in the

Children's Court; placed under community-based supervision (16 times as likely); or in detention (19 times as likely). On an average day in 2010-2011, Indigenous girls were almost 45 times as likely as non-Indigenous girls to be in detention, a much higher over-representation than was the case for Indigenous boys (22 times as likely).⁸⁰

Generally, girls under supervision are younger, on average, than young men. Perhaps because girls' peak age for offending is 15 and 16 (compared to boys at 17 years of age), very little research has been conducted into the involvement of younger girls, for example, those aged 10-14 years, in the criminal justice system.

While the concept of gender distinction is becoming increasingly recognised in the literature, debate regarding whether mainstream theories developed for males are applicable to girls, continues.⁸¹ Whether due to the over-representation of males among offender samples which arguably limited the sample size needed to permit the impact of gender, or a historical lack of interest exhibited by predominantly male researchers and administrators into issues affecting women and girls, 'the majority of research into risk factors for offending among young people has been conducted with samples either entirely or predominantly male'.⁸²

It is often assumed that the risk factors identified as most relevant for male offenders also apply to female populations, however, this is likely to be an erroneous assumption. While the majority of risk factors for offending for males and females identified to date are broadly similar, this may well reflect the nature and limitations of the research conducted, rather than the actual issues affecting female offender populations.

Running away (or going missing) has been shown to be a risk factor for female involvement in the criminal justice system in NSW.⁸³ It has also been identified as a risk factor in female re-offending.⁸⁴ From the limited research conducted to date, other factors that have been identified as more prevalent in relation to female juveniles in the criminal justice system than for males, include experience in OOHC, psychological or mental health issues, chronic illness or disability, socio-economic disadvantage; and difficulties at school.⁸⁵

Systems responses to going missing

Status offences

Status offences (such as running away, skipping school, disobeying authority, or violating curfew) are only illegal for youth under the age of 18 and initiate a range of harsh consequences, including arrest, probation, detention and time in juvenile correctional facility.

Sarri et al., (2016)⁸⁶ found that females were more likely to be arrested for status offences, such as running away, than their male peers. They were also more likely to be arrested for minor matters. Girls who went missing tended to be placed in low-security group homes or with relatives, whereas males who ran away were more likely to be placed in secure detention rather than returned to welfare placements.

The Chapin Hall (2009)⁸⁷ similarly identified that males were more likely to be detained in custodial or secure facilities than girls.

The US thinktank The Vera Institute, found however, that gender impacts more on girls: although they comprise just 25 percent of the overall juvenile justice system, 40 percent of young people who go to court for status offences —and 55 percent of those who are taken to court specifically for running away— are girls. In 2013, status offenses and technical probation violations accounted for 37 percent of girls' total detentions nationwide, compared to 25 percent of boys' detentions. The research confirmed that gender was a profoundly important factor leading girls into court and the juvenile justice system for status offenses. The issue of race also overlay the issue of gender, with girls of colour disparately affected by 'sexism...racism and classism'.⁸⁸

The Vera Institute's findings on gender is supported by early research undertaken by the AIC, which identified that girls were responded to more harshly than boys if they committed offences such as prostitution. While girls were more likely to be apprehended by police and be processed through the juvenile justice system, males were seen to engage in prostitution in order to survive and were judged less harshly as a result. For boys, prostitution:

'...is not as much a 'total lifestyle' as it becomes for girls who take up this profession...Economic need is the primary motivation for boys becoming involved in prostitution. While there is also an attraction to males who wish to be part of the homosexual community, financial circumstances are of prime importance. Others are

attracted to prostitution as a means of exploring and experimenting with their sexuality...There is, however, considerably more public sympathy for boys who engage in prostitution than for girls. Stigma and condemnation is less than for females and public consequences are usually less severe because of the relative status of males.’⁸⁹

Secure detention

The historic assumptions and approaches directed towards girls and young women, and particularly, the ‘relationships between classes, racism, genders and imprisonment’,⁹⁰ have strongly influenced the criminal justice system in Western nations.^{91 92} In Australia, the authorities’ moral judgments about female sexuality fuelled perceptions of girls as ‘bad’ or ‘deviant’ and led to their incarceration for ‘non-criminal behaviour for which adults cannot be punished,’⁹³ such as running away from OOHC. Girls were also detained for other non-criminal matters like truancy, vagrancy, homelessness and ‘being exposed to moral danger.’⁹⁴

Baidawi and Sheehan’s (2019)⁹⁵ review of contemporary administrative data relating to 300 young people involved in both the child welfare and criminal justice systems in Victoria, identified ‘unexpectedly’ high rates in the use of secure welfare placements, a ‘relatively rare’ option designed to be used only where there is a substantial and immediate risk of harm and it is assessed that no less restrictive option exists to protect a child. Going missing from home or care was identified as one of a small number of significant risks that warranted detention in such a placement.

THE CURRENT STUDY

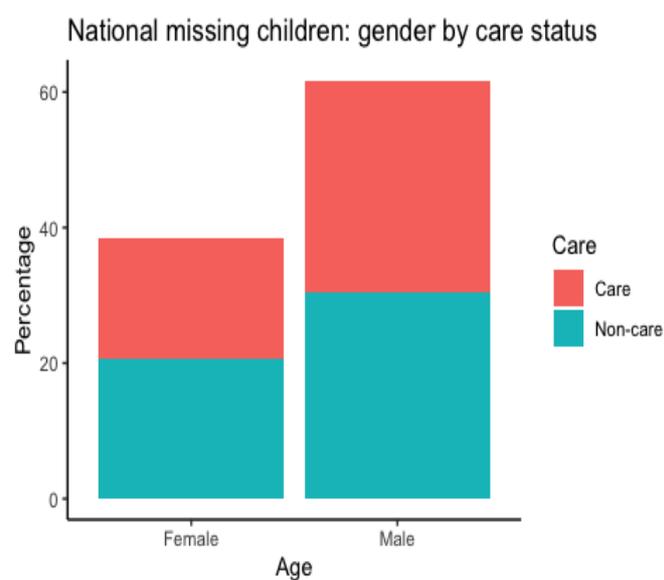
Children (aged 0-12)

The findings in relation to the gender of children who went missing was unexpected.

In a departure from the literature, the current study found that more male children went missing than female children. Males comprised almost two-thirds of missing children nationally, at 61.7 percent. Females accounted for just 38 percent of missing children.

The rates for the OOHC and non-care cohort were broadly consistent.

Caution should be exercised when interpreting these figures given the small numbers involved and the limitations arising from a 30-day study.



Gender	Care_status	n_indiv	pc_indiv
Female	Care	40	17.6
Female	Non-care	47	20.7
Male	Care	71	31.3
Male	Non-care	69	30.4

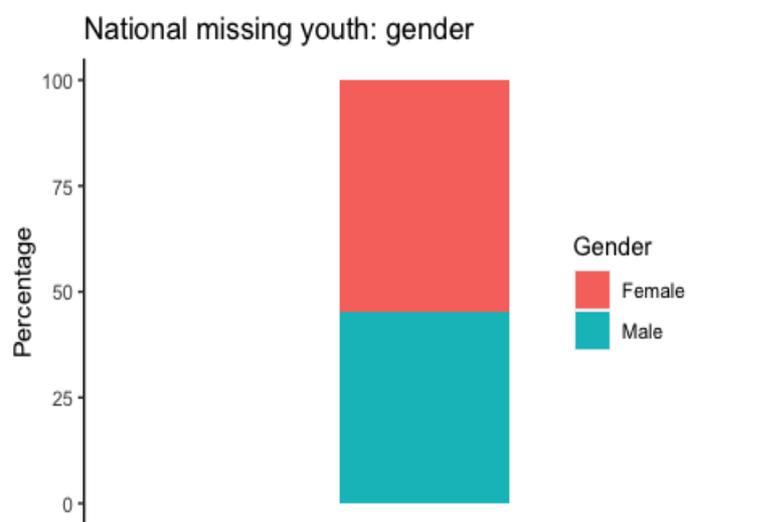
Youth (aged 13-17 inclusive)

The findings in relation to gender in the current study are broadly consistent with the literature for both OOHC and non-care youth, in that females were more likely to go missing than males.

Nationally, just over 52 percent of the youth reported missing during the month were female.

J1 however, defied this trend: males (55.3 percent) were more likely to go missing in that jurisdiction than females.

In the other jurisdictions, the percentage of female missing youth ranged from 51.5 percent (J3) to 68.4 percent (J5).



Gender	n_indiv	percent
Female	621	54.7
Male	515	45.3

RACE/ETHNICITY OR CULTURAL IDENTITY

CONTEXT

Australia

Australian research on the specific experiences of non-Caucasian missing youth is very limited. Nonetheless, ethnicity or cultural identity should be considered when considering why youth go missing, and agency responses to them. For example, some communities may:

- be potentially less inclined to report an absence to police, due either to cultural approaches to absences, reluctance about engaging with police, and/or cultural mores about public identification of community members;
- prefer to rely on personal networks to locate a missing family member or friend;
- utilise non-white networks while missing;
- regard existing agencies and/or programs as irrelevant to their needs or as ineffective; and
- may have not received the assistance and services they require when people go missing.

International evidence of race or cultural identity being a risk factor for going missing is mixed.⁹⁶

England and Wales

Little research has specifically focused on race or cultural identity as a factor when young people go missing. For example, while Biehal, Mitchell and Wade⁹⁷ reported that people from minority ethnic groups were significantly more likely to go missing as teenagers than Whites, race was not the principal focus of the study.

The UK charity The Railway Children has argued that the lack of research in this area reflects services' inability to offer meaningful assistance, or to appear relevant, to black and minority ethnic (BME) youth and Travellers/Romany/Gypsies. Agencies themselves however, commonly attribute the under-reporting of missing incidents to the young people themselves, due to 'cultural differences and distrust of outside agencies, and the fact that BME young people may be less likely to disclose sexual abuse because of issues around honour and respect'.⁹⁸

Trafficked children in OOHC

Trafficked children and young people, many of whom have been brought into England and Wales from abroad, are also regarded by many agencies as a hard-to-reach cohort. For example, The charity Railway Children reported that services often complained that asylum-seeking families were particularly hard to reach, partly because they were 'reluctant to involve the police for fear of jeopardising their asylum application or because of bad experiences in their country of origin.'⁹⁹

Trafficked children are particularly vulnerable to going missing from OOHC.¹⁰⁰ For example, ECPAT UK and Missing People¹⁰¹ have advised that approximately one-third of trafficked children taken into care repeatedly go missing. The All Party Parliamentary Group (the 'APPG') inquiry into children missing from care¹⁰² identified that the data on trafficked children missing from care was incomplete and patchy but estimated that 60 percent of suspected child victims of trafficking placed in care subsequently go missing, often from unsuitable accommodation such as bed and breakfasts or hotels.

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills ('Ofsted') has found that there is little understanding by services of the risks for trafficked children going missing: information was generally based on anecdotal evidence, and there was limited evidence that agencies were adapting to fill the needs of these children.¹⁰³

Recent reports indicate that the trafficking of children and young people into, from and within the United Kingdom remains a major concern.¹⁰⁴

The United States

In the United States, Fasulo et al (2002)¹⁰⁵ did not find race or cultural identity to be a significant factor.

The US Department of Justice NISMART data similarly indicates that runaway/throwaway youth (although not specifically the OOHC population) in the United States 'did not come disproportionately from any of the major racial and ethnic groups'.¹⁰⁶

Chapin Hall however has found that African-American and Hispanic youth in OOHC are more likely to run away than their White peers : a difference which 'is consistent with other well-documented racial disparities in the trajectories of youth once they have been placed in out-of-home care' including slower exits from care, lower rates of reunification, and higher rates of re-entry than youth who are

White.¹⁰⁷ This finding suggested that African-American and Hispanic youth were more likely to experience adverse outcomes for which youth who run away are at risk:

‘In this way, African-American and Hispanic youth are further disadvantaged relative to their White counterparts by the very system that is supposed to protect them and promote their well-being, [accordingly] [p]olicymakers and child welfare administrators have an obligation to address this disparity’.¹⁰⁸

Unlike other studies which often featured very small non-Caucasian populations, the Chapin Hall interview cohort was predominantly (88 percent) African-American. This suggests that it should properly be regarded as a study of African-American youth in OOHC, rather than as a study of youth in care generally.

However, the findings are often presented in race-neutral terms, or referred to when considering predominantly Caucasian cohorts, as if race or cultural considerations are largely irrelevant when discussing youth running away or going missing from care.¹³

In many parts of the United States today, runaways from OOHC are automatically regarded as ‘status offenders’ and propelled into the juvenile justice system.¹⁰⁹ This has been identified as particularly impacting on girls of colour.¹¹⁰

It may be that the demographics of missing youth are changing in the US, that researchers are becoming more adept in identifying various populations, or that services are becoming better at providing for young people of colour.

For example, while research published in 2006 drawing upon data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health did not identify significant differences in running away among racial and ethnic groups, more recent data taken from the National Runaway Safeline revealed that youth of colour appeared to be overrepresented among runaway youth in crisis: 23 percent identified as black or African American, compared with 14 percent of the general population.¹¹¹

¹³ The Chapin Hall collaboration with the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services was the largest study undertaken to that point of young people who ran away from OOHC. It comprised administrative records for over 14,000 youth who had run away between 1993 and 2003, as well as interviews with 42 young people and 16 informants such as foster parents.

THE CURRENT STUDY

Jurisdictions varied as to the extent and nature of the information provided regarding the ethnicity of missing youth. Some based a determination of ethnic identity on racial appearance, others on country of birth, or language spoken at home. Some provided a very extensive and detailed analysis of various ethnicities, whereas other jurisdictions simply identified 'Australian' or 'Caucasian' and 'other'. Several jurisdictions also recorded very high rates of 'Nil Recorded' or had affixed an ethnic identity to an individual which varied between missing episodes.

Given the breadth of interpretations and identification procedures involved, as well as the small sample sizes that were obvious once analysis by ethnicity was undertaken, it was decided to combine the various ethnicities into a few simple identifiers: Caucasian, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD), Indigenous and Not Recorded.

The following results should be considered with caution.

Children (aged 0-12 years)

There was a sizeable cohort in both the OOHC and non-care groups for whom no ethnic status was able to be identified. Nationally, 'Not recorded' was stated in over a third (34.8 percent) of matters.

Disregarding the 'Not recorded' set, the vast majority (65 percent) of missing children were Caucasian. Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) children comprised just over eight percent (8.7 percent) of all missing children.

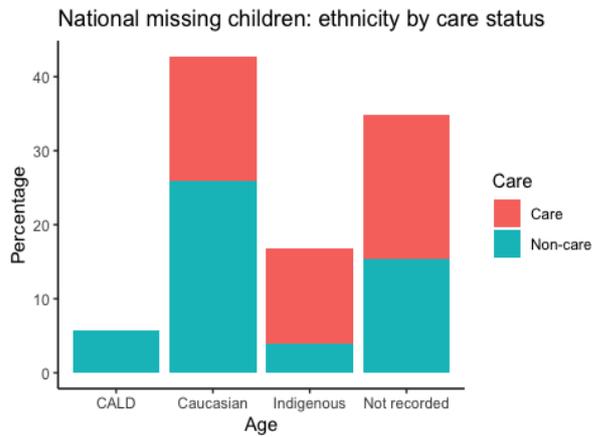
Children missing from OOHC

Differences between the OOHC cohort and children not in care were identified in respect of cultural background: for example, none of children identified as CALD were in OOHC.

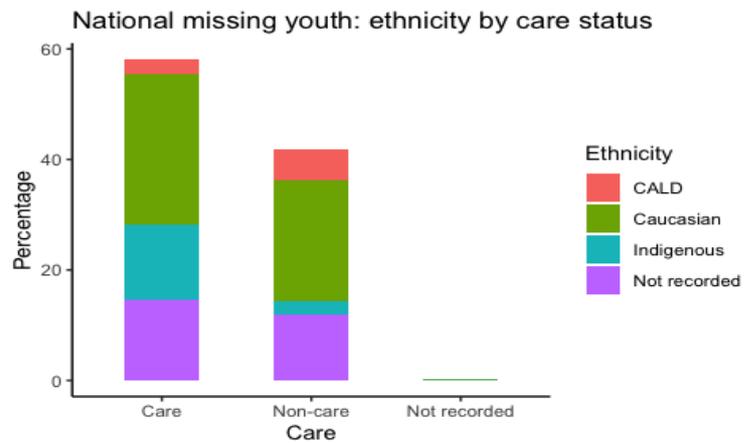
Youth (13-17 years)

Nationally, data was unavailable for almost a third of individual youth.

Of the youth whose ethnicity was recorded, the vast majority (70 percent) were Caucasian. CALD youth comprised 12.8 percent of missing youth.



Ethnicity	Care_status	n_indiv	pc_indiv
CALD	Non-care	13	5.7
Caucasian	Care	38	16.7
Caucasian	Non-care	59	26.0
Indigenous	Care	29	12.8
Indigenous	Non-care	9	4.0
Not recorded	Care	44	19.4
Not recorded	Non-care	35	15.4



Care_status	Ethnicity	n_indiv	pc_indiv
Care	CALD	30	2.6
Care	Caucasian	310	27.3
Care	Indigenous	154	13.6
Care	Not recorded	166	14.6
Non-care	CALD	65	5.7
Non-care	Caucasian	246	21.7
Non-care	Indigenous	30	2.6
Non-care	Not recorded	134	11.8
Not recorded	Caucasian	1	0.1
Not recorded	Indigenous	1	0.1

INDIGENEITY

CONTEXT

Approximately 3.3 percent (n= 798,365) of the Australian population is Indigenous, of whom 35 percent (271,444) are children and young people under 15 years of age.¹¹² Approximately 40 percent (n=18,000) of the OOHC population is Indigenous.¹¹³

Australian experience

Limited research has been conducted

Australian research into the Indigenous experience of going missing is very limited. Few studies appear to have utilised Indigenous researchers or explored community knowledge about Indigenous children who go missing. Predominantly white services and institutions have also not been as effective as they should be, including in conducting research into and responding to Indigenous people's experiences of going missing.

Researchers have sometimes conceded their lack of insight. For example, in 1982 Wilson commented that 'while there are undoubtedly runaways of Aboriginal descent, they were not evident to our interviewers and clearly used different networks than white Australians...'¹¹⁴ Referring to the 'many cases of young Aborigines who absconded from juvenile institutions', Wilson noted that:

'running away behaviour by youthful Aborigines was endemic at certain institutions reflecting, if nothing else, the failure of such institutions to provide a satisfactory environment for their charges... The fact that we did not pick these absconders up in our sample demonstrates again, the likelihood that they use different mechanisms and networks to survive out on the streets'.¹¹⁵

Wilson also raised the possibility that 'many existing agencies and/or programs are perceived by the runaway as irrelevant to his or her needs, and are not as effective as they should be.'¹¹⁶

Almost the same criticisms regarding the lack of knowledge about Indigenous experiences of going missing were made by James et al four decades later. The authors noted that very little is known about Indigenous missing persons, apart from information produced in one NSW publication¹¹⁷ relating to young Indigenous females who go missing. James et al proposed that research examining the experiences of young Indigenous people in OOHC, including those who go missing repeatedly, was

needed. Strategies to prevent these missing episodes, the types of agencies that should be involved, and the role of the police, should be a priority.¹¹⁸

In 2017 the Australian Institute of Criminology reported that between three and 51 percent of individual jurisdictions' missing person reports involved Indigenous people. Observing that 'little if any literature' has examined missing rates among Indigenous people, it was suggested that Indigenous people may represent 'a distinct group' of missing people in Australia, and was described as:

'a naturally more transient population [which is] potentially less inclined to report an absence to police. Among the Indigenous community an absence may be just that—understood by the person 'missing' and their family as time elsewhere—but in some instances may mask a genuine missing episode. Similarly, there may be reluctance about engaging with police, or cultural mores about public identification of community members, that delay reporting a missing person event to police or contributing to missing person investigations. Instead, there may be a preference to rely on personal networks to locate a missing family member or friend'.¹¹⁹

Literature reviews have been unable to locate evidence about risk factors specific to Indigenous youth who go missing from OOHC placements or locate evidence of culturally appropriate interventions 'that could be considered in the development of strategies to support young Aboriginal people'.¹²⁰

The 2017 Victorian Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) Centre for Human Services Research and Evaluation literature review¹²¹ was also unable to identify evidence about risk factors specific to Indigenous youth who go missing from care placements. Nor could it find evidence of culturally appropriate interventions 'that could be considered in the development of strategies to support young Aboriginal people'. It referred to the single NSW study of missing Aboriginal girls¹²² - inaccurately described as Queensland research into missing youth generally - and reported that factors contributing to young people going missing comprised:

'difficult and often traumatic family circumstances, poor performance or conflict at school, inter-related home and school problems, problems at home such as violence, alcohol abuse, sexual abuse, safety concerns, abduction by a non-custodial parent, and problems at school related to learning, racism and bullying'.¹²³

The impacts of colonisation and criminalisation

Neither the AIC nor the DHHS papers reference literature that has demonstrated the impact of Australia's history of colonisation, dispossession and institutional racism on Indigenous peoples. The impact of the child welfare system as a critical first step on the pathway to Indigenous offending has also been officially acknowledged by the Commonwealth Parliament through the 2008 National Apology to the Stolen Generations.¹²⁴ Inter-generational and socioeconomic disadvantage, exacerbated by Australia's history of dispossession, colonisation and the forced removal of children from their communities^{125 126} has shaped Indigenous over-representation in the criminal justice system.^{127 128}

Limitations of the criminal justice system itself, such as poor cultural competence, racism and structural inequality, and the role these factors play in alienating Indigenous people while instilling in them a distrust of the legal system, have also been identified as risk factors leading to Indigenous people's over-representation in the criminal justice system.¹²⁹ As acknowledged by the WA Police Commissioner in his historic 2018 apology, police were heavily involved in the practices that created the Stolen Generation¹⁴:

'the forceful removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families and their communities; the displacement of mothers and their children, sisters, fathers and brothers – the loss of family and resulting destruction of culture [which] has had grave impacts... land dispossession, violence, racism, incarceration and deaths in custody have occurred through a history of conflict with Aboriginal people and police'.¹³⁰

The failure of police to assist Indigenous communities has extended to missing person cases, as was recognised by the 2016 NSW police apology¹³¹ made to the families of the three children murdered in Bowraville in the early 1990s.

Canadian experience

As in Australia, indigenous people may regard agencies with deep suspicion because of familial experiences of forced removal, institutionalisation and incarceration.¹³² The legacy of the Canadian

¹⁴ The term 'Stolen Generations' refers to Indigenous children who were forcefully removed from their families between the 1890s and 1970s under Government policy. Children were placed in institutions or in non-Indigenous foster or adoptive families. Many children did not see their families or communities again.

Residential School experience provides an important context for Australian police when responding to young people who go missing from OOHC.

Residential Schools were established by the Canadian government and administered by religious bodies. Ostensibly designed to educate indigenous children, they also operated to indoctrinate and assimilate children into mainstream Christian Canadian society.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (the 'TRC') was created in 2008 by the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement. The Agreement settled the class actions against the government for abuses perpetrated in Residential Schools throughout the late 19th and 20th centuries. It heard from more than 6000 witnesses, many of whom had been taken from their families as children.

The TRC found that '[c]hildren were abused, physically and sexually, and...died in the schools in numbers that would not have been tolerated in any school system anywhere in the country, or in the world.'¹³³

Although running away was not a crime, students were treated as if they were truants, and could be returned to the schools against their will. Runaways who were located could be charged with property offences if they went missing in their school uniforms, and parents who assisted their children were commonly threatened with prosecution. Children who ran away on multiple occasions could be sentenced to a reformatory until they turned twenty-one. At least thirty-three students died, usually from exposure, after running away from school. In a significant number of cases, it was concluded that the deaths could have been prevented if school officials had mounted earlier and more effective searches and notified police, officials and family members.

The TRC concluded that running away, or going missing, from the Schools was an act of resistance against colonisation and the 'cultural genocide' of Indigenous communities.

In 2008, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper apologised to former residents of the 'Indian Residential School' system.¹³⁴ In 2017, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau made a further apology to former students of Newfoundland and Labrador residential schools who had been excluded from the original government apology.¹³⁵

The intersection of race and gender

Between 1980 and 2012, at least 1,017 Aboriginal girls and women were killed and 164 went missing.

The TRC recommended that a public inquiry be established into this ongoing legacy of the Residential School system: 'the most disturbing aspect of this victimization...the extraordinary number of Aboriginal women who have been murdered or are reported as missing'.

The issue has also been highlighted by Amnesty International (2004)¹³⁶ and reports which have identified that Indigenous girls in contemporary foster care are targets for sexual predators.¹³⁷

The National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls¹³⁸ reported in 2019.¹³⁹ It called for transformative legal and social changes to resolve the crisis that has devastated indigenous communities across the country and identified persistent and deliberate human and indigenous rights violations and abuses as the root cause behind Canada's staggering rates of violence against Indigenous women, girls and LGBTQI people.

United States experience

As in Canada, the Native American Boarding School system wreaked devastation across indigenous communities.¹⁴⁰ It is estimated that there were over 500 such schools across the country: approximately 60,000 Native children were still enrolled in boarding schools in the early 1970s. Running away was an act of rebellion, and punishments for going missing were harsh.¹⁴¹ However, although US policy was a model for Australia and Canada Indigenous residential school policies, unlike those countries, the United States has not apologized to the indigenous people for the Schools' impacts on culture and language.¹⁴²

Contemporary studies on American Indian/Alaska Native youth who have run away or gone missing from home or care, are very limited.

The US Department of Justice has estimated that one in every 130 American Indian/Alaska Native children go missing each year, although this number is likely to be an under-estimate, attributed partly to the lack of centralised reporting system operating in tribal communities.¹⁴³

New Zealand experience

New Zealand is also struggling with the legacy of the institutional abuse of young people, particularly Maori. Young people in post-war New Zealand who ran away from residential facilities were subject to harsh punishments, including the withdrawal of “privileges”, mental health interventions and secure confinement.¹⁴⁴

The Confidential Listening and Assistance Service (‘the Service’) found that staff often made no real effort to find young people in care when they went missing. The Service also reported that the OOHC system had contributed to:

‘a dark legacy of suffering and crime...there was a clear outcome of subsequent violent and criminal behaviour, together with the growth of criminal gangs. Many participants moved from Social Welfare care to Borstal to prison.’¹⁴⁵

The impact of child welfare policies and practices on young people in care, agency responses when youth went missing, is currently being investigated by the Royal Commission into Abuse in Care.¹⁴⁶

THE CURRENT STUDY

Twenty years ago, the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody¹⁴⁷ highlighted that the inaccurate recording of Indigenous status carries potentially adverse implications for the individual involved, and renders suspect policy and planning based on an apparent under-reporting of Indigenous status. It ushered in the mandatory recording of Indigenous status in the criminal justice system.

It is therefore concerning that data provided by the various police forces regarding identification of Indigenous status in the current study was unreliable. Much of the data had inconsistencies which saw individuals variously identified as Indigenous in one missing episode, and as non-Indigenous or Not Recorded in another just days later. It is also evident in the large number of 'Not recorded' entries relating to Indigeneity. For example, nationally, the status of over one-third of individual children and youth could not be identified.

The following analysis should therefore be regarded with considerable caution: it is based only on the number of positive identifications of Indigenous or non-Indigenous status.

Children (aged 0-12 years)

Nationally, Indigenous status was 'Not recorded' in over a third (34.8 percent) of matters.

Indigenous children comprised over a quarter (25.6 percent) of those who went missing.

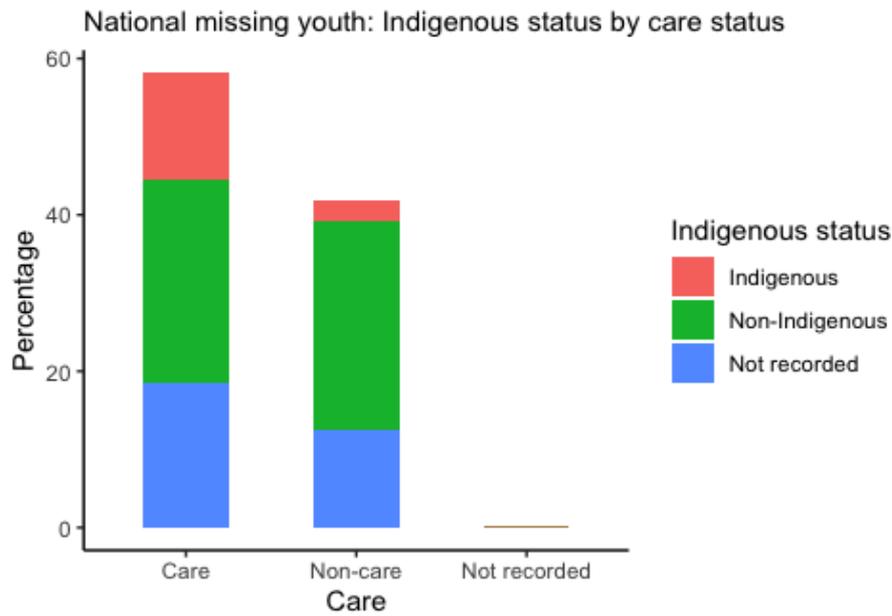
Children missing from OOHC

Differences between the OOHC cohort and children who were not in care were identified: while Indigenous children comprised under eight percent of children not in care, they comprised over a quarter (26 percent) of children missing from OOHC.

Youth (aged 13-17 years)

Nationally 110 youth were identified as Indigenous. This comprised 18 percent of all youth reported missing during the 30-day data collection period for whom racial identification was possible (and 11.5 percent of youth when including the 'Not Recorded' category).

18% OF MISSING YOUTH WERE
INDIGENOUS



Care_status	Indig_status	n_indiv	pc_indiv
Care	Indigenous	154	13.6
Care	Non-Indigenous	296	26.1
Care	Not recorded	210	18.5
Non-care	Indigenous	30	2.6
Non-care	Non-Indigenous	304	26.8
Non-care	Not recorded	141	12.4
Not recorded	Indigenous	1	0.1
Not recorded	Non-Indigenous	1	0.1

Youth missing from OOHC

The figures in relation to young people missing from OOHC are more pronounced. Nationally, 85 percent (n=93) of Indigenous youth were in OOHC

85% OF MISSING INDIGENOUS
YOUTH WERE IN OOHC

While racial status could not be identified for over a third of the OOHC cohort, analysis of those who could be identified indicate that over a third (34.2 percent) of youth missing from OOHC were Indigenous. This compared to nine percent of youth not in care.

34% OF YOUTH
WHO WENT MISSING FROM OOHC
WERE INDIGENOUS

Jurisdictional analysis

The proportion of Indigenous youth varied by jurisdiction. In J1, just over 36 percent (n=38) of missing youth were Indigenous. Of this group, only one youth was not in OOHC. Further, 49.3 percent of youth missing from OOHC were Indigenous.

In J5, over 84 percent of the OOHC cohort was Indigenous.

ADDITIONAL INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTICS

CONTEXT

SEXUAL IDENTITY

Little research has been conducted into the missing patterns and experiences of transgender or non-conforming youth. In 2017, three percent of youth connecting with the US National Runaway Safeline¹⁵ identified as either transgender or gender nonconforming.¹⁴⁸

LGBTQI youth are over-represented among runaway youth in the United States.¹⁴⁹ Going missing from OOHC may be more common amongst LGBTQI youth than amongst heterosexual youth¹⁵⁰ perhaps because:

‘foster caregivers and staff may not have the resources or expertise to protect youth from harassment in group homes and to respond to the unique needs of youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender’.¹⁵¹

While the sexual identification of youth was not often considered in the early literature on missing people, some studies examining the reasons why youth had become homeless after running away from home or care have observed that ‘sexual identity concerns’ were evident amongst youth ‘trying to be independent and connect with the gay and lesbian community.’¹⁵²

DISABILITY

The research is ambiguous on the impact of that disability has on missing events.

Some studies suggest that children with disabilities, particularly developmental disabilities, were significantly over-represented in runaway and missing youth^{153 154} particularly if they had experienced physical or sexual abuse or other forms of maltreatment. Children with behavioural disorders, mental retardation and some type of communication disorder were significantly more likely to run away than children with other disabilities.

¹⁵The Runaway Safeline, (1–800- RUNAWAY), once known as the National Runaway Switchboard, is a federally funded national resource that provides services to youth and their families. It allows runaway and homeless youth or their parents to call for assistance or guidance; obtain 24-hour referrals to community resources, including shelter, food banks, legal assistance, and social services agencies; and seek crisis intervention counselling.

Common features of OOHC may increase the risk of going missing for youth with disabilities

Children and young people with disabilities may experience many of the factors that have been identified as increasing the likelihood that a young person will go missing from OOHC. For example, placement instability, delayed reunification, the increased likelihood of remaining in foster care, and the compounding of vulnerabilities such as the difficulties of recruiting properly trained staff, may increase the risk of a missing episode.

While there is evidence that placement stability is greater for children with disabilities living in foster care than for children without disabilities¹⁵⁵ children with disabilities living in residential care are thought to be at increased risk of losing contact with their families and communities, rendering them vulnerable to social isolation as young adults. This has been attributed to social workers assuming that a child with disabilities is less affected by separation from family, leading to the importance of parental contact being downplayed by workers in some residential homes.

Additional vulnerability to institutional abuse and neglect

Children with disabilities have also been found to be at increased risk of abuse and maltreatment in OOHC due to the likelihood they will have fewer outside contacts than other children, and are more likely to require intimate care, possibly from a number of carers. Young people with disabilities may have an impaired capacity to resist or avoid abuse, have communication difficulties which may make it difficult to tell others what is happening, be inhibited about complaining because of a fear of losing services, be especially vulnerable to bullying and intimidation.

Youth with disabilities are also especially vulnerable to systems abuse, as reported in the NSW Community Services Commission (the CSC) investigation into the deaths of 211 people with disabilities (15 percent of whom were children).¹⁵⁶ The CSC was scathing of the 'culture of death' that pervaded institutional care for the disabled and allowed inadequate supervision and poor casework practices to flourish.

The national *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse* investigated allegations of sexual abuse relating to children with disabilities. It found that children and young people with disability 'are rarely present in discussions about sexual abuse, they are also remarkably absent from Australian literature on this subject'.¹⁵⁷

MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

The literature is inconsistent about the impact of mental health on missing events, and 'it is difficult to clearly separate cause and effect relationships'.¹⁵⁸ This has also been observed in relation to young people's experiences of substance use, homelessness, exploitation and delinquency.

Essentially, many of the individual characteristics that might increase the likelihood of going missing from OOHC, may also be the result of going missing – there is no linear or obvious causal relationship.

Young people who go missing from OOHC may have experienced emotional or psychological harm that pre-dates their entry to care.¹⁵⁹ Children in care with mental and behavioural health issues have been found to be more likely to run away, while those with developmental and cognitive disabilities are less likely to run away.¹⁶⁰ Studies of homeless youth, many of whom comprise young people who have gone missing or run away from OOHC, have reported that between 19 to 50 percent have a 'serious psychiatric condition.'¹⁶¹

One study¹⁶² found that diagnosed mental health concerns were moderately associated with going missing, whereas personality disorders and severe mental illness, such as schizophrenia, were associated with reduced risk.

People experiencing poor mental health may experience numerous triggers that can increase the likelihood that they may go missing, including:

'frustrations with health professionals, opposing ideas with loved ones about how to address a mental health issue, uncertainty about who or how to ask for help or a sense that there are no alternatives but to go missing'¹⁶³

However, as the Vera Institute has observed, while there may be psychological roots to runaway behaviour, many foster youth have mental health issues, but do not go missing.¹⁶⁴

Recent studies have come to different conclusions about the significance of mental health concerns in missing episodes. For example, missing Queensland girls aged 13-17 have been identified as having high rates of mental illness and suicide ideation¹⁶⁵ and a study of New Zealand runaways from OOHC¹⁶⁶ found that those with suicide ideation posed the highest risk of going missing from care. However, a 2015 study of American runaway youth¹⁶⁷ found that emotional disturbance or mental ill-health was not a predictor of going missing.

TRAUMATIC CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES

Traumatic childhood experiences (also termed 'Adverse Childhood Experiences' (or 'ACEs') encompass bereavement due to the loss of a parent or significant person in a child's life, witnessing or experiencing physical, sexual or emotional abuse, experiencing homelessness, mental illness, 'socio-economic disadvantage, poor educational attainment, family breakdown, marginalisation in the community, and discriminatory treatment by agencies'.¹⁶⁸ Experiences of trauma have been shown to feature strongly in the backgrounds of young people in OOHC, as well as in the criminal justice system.¹⁶⁹ Although ACEs are strongly associated with subsequent criminal activity,^{170 171} 'research into the factors that differentiate traumatised youth who do not offend from those who do...is sorely lacking.'¹⁷²

Research into the specific impact of ACEs on missing behaviour could not be located, apart from a 2018 New Zealand study¹⁷³ which found there was no significant link between trauma and absconding behaviour amongst young people in OOHC.

However, numerous studies have considered the impact of maltreatment, including physical and sexual abuse to be a factor in the lives of people missing from hospital and community school populations.¹⁷⁴ Other researchers have speculated that young people 'who have not disclosed a history of sexual abuse are less trusting of treatment providers and are more likely to go missing compared with those who disclosed and received specific support.'¹⁷⁵

The AIC has noted that most state and territory police services (apart from those in Tasmania and the Northern Territory) refer to risk factors for missing persons as a list of characteristics, one of which is 'experience of family and domestic violence or other serious family conflict and abuse'¹⁷⁶.

SUBSTANCE USE

Researchers have found that alcohol and other substance-related disorders are associated with increased risk of running away^{177 178}, although a causal link has not been established.¹⁷⁹ It is not known whether the use of drugs and/or alcohol precipitates running away, or whether being asked or forced to leave home or a care placement led to increased substance use.

THE CURRENT STUDY

Data relating to police determinations of the vulnerability of missing youth was provided in respect of 398 individuals and 808 missing episodes. All of the assessments related to youth reported missing in a single jurisdiction (J2).

Youth (aged 13-17 years)

Sixty percent (n=238) of the 398 young people reported as missing in J2 had been assessed as 'vulnerable' at least once in the 30-day data collection period.

An analysis of missing episodes revealed that 59 percent (n=476) were categorised as involving a vulnerable youth.

Youth missing from OOHC

There was a difference in the categorisation of missing youth, depending whether they went missing from home or care. For example, 56 percent of individuals missing from OOHC had been assessed by police as 'vulnerable'. This compared to 64 percent of the non-care group.

Similarly, 57 percent (n=325) of OOHC missing episodes involved a vulnerable person, compared to 63 percent (n=151) of episodes where the young person had gone missing from home.

This suggests either that data error resulted in the risk assessment of the remaining 44 percent of the OOHC cohort not being recorded, or that police had deemed some young people in care not to be vulnerable. It also indicates some discrepancy in how youth were determined to be at risk, for a young person could be classified as vulnerable on one occasion, and not regarded as at risk when they went missing again a few days or weeks later.

While the difference between the two cohorts appears relatively small, it indicates that the vulnerability of young people in OOHC was not fully appreciated by police. To illustrate: the OOHC cohort went missing an average of 2.8 episodes in the 30-day data collection period, while the non-care group, which went missing less frequently at an average of 1.23 times in the same period. In other words, the group that went missing less frequently was deemed to be more vulnerable.

Transgender, nonconforming or non-binary youth

Only one jurisdiction provided information relating to non-binary youth. Due to the small numbers of individuals involved, this category was removed from the analysis. All other jurisdictions advised that this information was not collected.

Traumatic childhood experiences

Another measure of the vulnerability of missing youth is indicated by information provided by J2 regarding whether a missing youth was known to other areas of the police.

Analysis of this data indicated that 43 percent of missing episodes (n=350), involved someone that police had previously identified as being a victim of crime. Youth missing from OOHC were also more likely to have been a previous victim of crime than young people who went missing from home: 53 percent of missing OOHC episodes, and 20 percent of missing episodes involving youth not in care, involved a victim of crime.

This data indicates that young people who go missing, particularly those from OOHC, are highly vulnerable. This knowledge should be used to shape the response of both welfare and law enforcement agencies, for example, through strategies designed to reduce the criminalisation and justice system involvement of missing youth.

Youth in OOHC demonstrated a range of characteristics that police regarded as increasing their vulnerability while they were missing. For example, police raised concerns about young people who had experienced domestic violence, and those who had an intellectual or cognitive impairment. The chief concerns noted by police in missing episodes however, fell into two main categories: health concerns (particularly mental health) and involvement in the criminal justice system. This is discussed further at Part 7, Experiences while missing.

PART 3: YOUTH WHO REPEATEDLY GO MISSING

This section examines a cohort regarded as constituting a particular challenge for police services and carers: youth who repeatedly go missing. For the purposes of this analysis, 'repeat missing' were defined as youth aged 13-17 inclusive reported missing more than once in the 30-day data collection period. This analysis is presented alongside a review of the pertinent literature.

CONTEXT

The literature suggests that about 34–38 percent of all missing person cases involve people who have gone missing on more than one occasion.^{180 181}

Some studies have suggested that going missing more than once is confined to a relatively small group of young people, who most commonly go missing from residential care. For example, an American study of youth placed in OOHC, found that one-third went missing within six months, one third between six and 12 months, and the final third a year or more after placement. The youth had between two and 19 missing reports during the study period, and the longest episode for each youth ranged from two days to six months. The young people involved had predominantly entered care at age 13 or older, and already had a previous history of running away.¹⁸²

Other research has found that youth who repeatedly go missing do so an average of three times in a 12-month period^{183 184} although an English study¹⁸⁵ of 51 high risk youth reported an average of eight missing episodes over the year.

A 2020 Canadian study¹⁸⁶ of over 6,500 repeat missing youth found youth went missing 3-10 times on average, but that those aged between the ages of 16 and 17 were responsible for more than half of all repeat missing reports. Over one-quarter of the entire youth sample had been reported missing 20 or more times. Just 18 individuals were responsible for 30.7 percent of the repeat reports in the youth data set, 15 youths had gone missing 50–99 times and three went missing 100–144 times.

High rates of repeated missing events are evident in studies of Australian missing youth. For example, the Australian Institute of Criminology reported that over two-thirds of missing person reports in Queensland concerned youth who had been reported missing at least once during the period considered. In the Northern Territory, 13 percent of young people aged 13-17 years had been reported missing three or more times: the number of times someone was reported missing in a year ranged from three to eight episodes.¹⁸⁷

The pattern of missing

Once young people have gone missing once, a pattern of going missing may develop.¹⁸⁸ Going missing once has been found to be a strong predictor of future missing behaviour, regardless of whether the young person previously went missing from OOHC or before placement.

The Chapin Hall^{189 190} suggested that each missing event increases the risk of subsequent event. A pattern of going missing is thought to reflect the young person's learned style of coping in response to difficult circumstances'.¹⁹¹ Other studies have found that a history of going missing may increase the odds of going missing again by as much as twofold.¹⁹²

The risk factors

The AIC has identified the potential risk factors for young people repeatedly going missing, as comprising both demographic and social risk factors: the former being aged 13 to 17 years and being female, and the latter comprising an experience of severe family problems, severe family disruption, severe child abuse, higher levels of parental strictness, severe school problems, mental health concerns, and changes in family dynamics. For young people in OOHC, care placement factors, such as 'bullying or sexual harassment, abusive staff, a desire to protest against imposed limits, and an action amounting to a cry for help' also influence missing behaviour.¹⁹³

Youth in OOHC

Literature on the spatial dimensions of repeat missing cases has identified that the young people in OOHC placements are at higher risk of being among the repeat missing.¹⁹⁴ The most common location types from which youths go missing are institutional locations, such as residential care group homes.^{195 196}

Recent research has identified that young people in OOHC are more likely to be repeat or 'recidivist' missing than children not in care. This fact has remained consistent across studies regardless of whether the definition of 'repeat missing' was based on more than one episode, or more than three, five or more times, in any given period.¹⁹⁷ For example, Sidebottom et al, (2019) found that children missing ten times or more, were over nine times more likely to be in care compared to children who went missing once. The authors reported that 'the same pattern held when comparing one-time missing children with those who went missing two to nine times...**Only one variable was found to be statistically significant: being in care**'.¹⁹⁸ (my emphasis)

An indicator of vulnerability

Children and young people who go missing three or more times in a given period are regarded as a high-risk group.¹⁹⁹ Going missing repeatedly could simply be that a person simply wants to be somewhere else or with someone else some of the time.²⁰⁰ However, it is also a sign that there is something wrong where a person lives, or the situation they are in.²⁰¹ Repeatedly going missing has become increasingly understood as an indicator that a young person may be a victim of sexual exploitation.²⁰² Repeat missing youth also risk involvement in crime, and of becoming victims of child criminal exploitation. Repeat missing persons reports filed from the same institution highlights the fact that institutions themselves may be dangerous or risky locations.^{203 204 205}

Given the high incidence of repeat missing persons, identifying why youth repeatedly go missing might reduce the victimisation of the young people involved, as well as providing intelligence on the criminal activities of those exploiting young people. Finding a way to reduce the volume of these cases could also significantly lessen service demands and costs on police agencies.

THE CURRENT STUDY

In this study, the term 'repeat missing' is used to refer to youth who were reported missing on more than one occasion during the 30-day data collection period.

Youth (aged 13-17)

Repeat missing youth were over-represented in the missing youth population in the current study. Nationally, 59 percent of all missing youth went missing more than once during the month.

59% of YOUNG PEOPLE
WENT MISSING MORE THAN ONCE
DURING THE MONTH

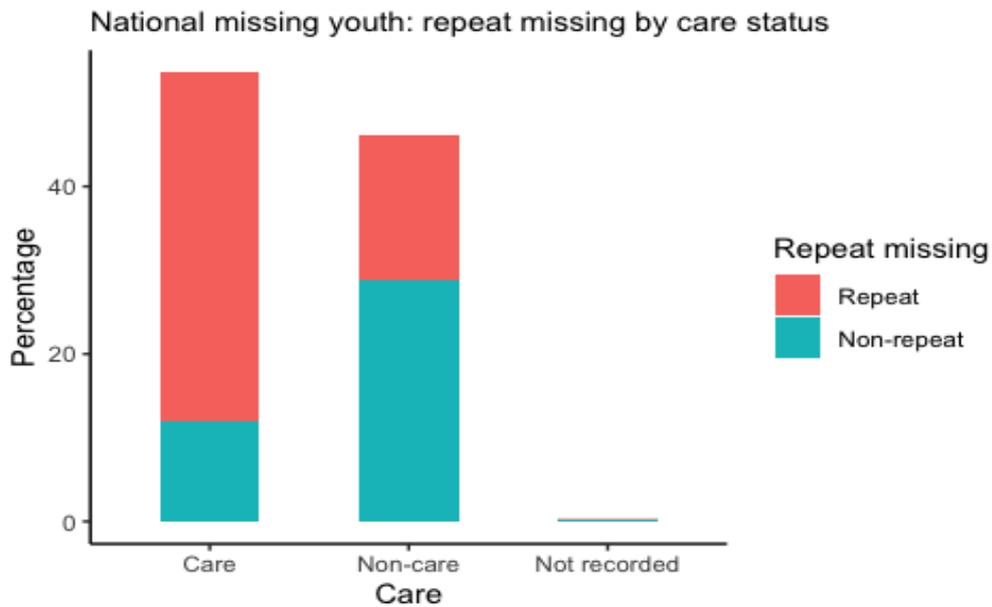
Youth missing from OOHC

Consistent with the literature, youth in OOHC were disproportionately represented amongst the repeat missing youth.

While they comprised 54 percent of all missing individuals nationally, youth in OOHC comprised 70.5 percent of all repeat missing youth.

70% OF REPEAT MISSING YOUTH
WERE IN OOHC

In contrast, the non-care cohort was less likely to go missing more than once during the month. Nationally just 37 percent of non-care youth were repeat missing.



Care_status	Repeat_miss	n_indiv	pc_indiv
Care	Repeat	393	41.6
Care	Non-repeat	113	12.0
Non-care	Repeat	163	17.3
Non-care	Non-repeat	273	28.9
Not recorded	Repeat	1	0.1
Not recorded	Non-repeat	1	0.1

Another way of considering the data is to examine the percentage of the youth cohort who went missing on more than one occasion during the month who were a) OOHC and b) Non-care youth. Nationally, 77 percent of youth missing from OOHC went missing on more than one occasion during the month.

77% OF OOHC YOUTH
WENT MISSING MORE THAN ONCE
DURING THE MONTH

PART 4: THE REASONS YOUTH GO MISSING FROM OOHC

This section discusses the factors identified in the literature that explain why a young person may go missing from care. This section also presents a thematic analysis of the reasons for going missing that were attributed to young people reported missing from OOHC in the 30-day data collection period.

CONTEXT

Push and pull factors

There are a multitude of factors that determine why someone goes missing from home or care. The literature describes these in a variety of ways. For example, Biehal et. al., coined the concept 'push' and 'pull' factors²⁰⁶ to describe the drivers that lead to a missing episode. 'Push factors' are those that drive a young person from their placement, such as the need to escape an unsafe or unsatisfactory situation. In contrast, 'pull factors' entice or attract a young person to leave: this may be the desire to see family or friends, or to return to a familiar neighbourhood, or embark upon a promising relationship.

Intersectionality

Another concept is that referred to by Bowden, Lambie and Willis (2018)²⁰⁷. This presents individual, relational and contextual factors that influence young people's motivations for going missing from care. These should be considered both separately and in combination.

Individual factors refer to specific characteristics of a child or young person that may explain the differences in going missing from OOHC compared to someone who goes missing from home. These are discussed in Part 2 of this report, and include: age, gender, race or ethnicity and Indigeneity, sexual identity, disability, mental health, and substance use.

Relational factors refer to specific family and peer influences that may influence missing episodes and behaviour, and are evident in factors such as detachment and the desire for social reconnection.

Contextual factors refer to the circumstances of the specific care placement and the broader context of the OOHC system. These factors include the nature of the environment in which a young person lives, issues of freedom/autonomy, boredom, and the influence of the physical environment. Broader systems issues peculiar to the OOHC environment are discussed in Part 5. These include abuse in care, placement instability, time in placement, the type of placement and disengagement with the education system.

There is significant overlap and interplay between these factors and the wider societal contexts that influence individual, relational and contextual factors. Aspects of young people's lives, including gender, ethnicity, Indigeneity and disability, cannot be separated from the historical, political and social environment in which they occur.

Limitations of the literature

The factors that impact on young people's lives and motivate them to go missing are often discussed in a vacuum that disregards the wider social context in which the individual child, and the systems that impact them, exist. The bulk of research of youth missing from care focuses mainly on youth's characteristics and pre-care experiences, rather than on placement-centered correlates²⁰⁸ such as the abuse known to have occurred in the OOHC system.

Literature discussing the relevance of ethnicity often neglects the fact that child removal practices were heavily shaped by negative views of poverty, social class and racism. Many of these factors continue to influence contemporary child welfare systems, as is reflected in the experiences of the Stolen Generations in Australia²⁰⁹, Maori in New Zealand²¹⁰ and indigenous peoples through the Residential Schools in Canada²¹¹ and the United States.

Consideration of gender in missing episodes also requires a consideration of the historical treatment of girls and women that led to vulnerable children who had run away from abuse at home being criminalised and detained, ostensibly for their own protection, in child welfare institutions and juvenile prisons. The 'highly selective delinquency manufacturing process ... primarily designed to save "good" children from "bad" children'²¹² that operated in both child welfare and criminal justice systems led to one-third of girls in the NSW justice system being incarcerated simply because they had run away from home or care. Girls in OOHC were 40 times more likely to be incarcerated than other girls, and often remained in detention 'by default' when bail conditions could not be met due to lack of appropriate accommodation or homelessness.²¹³ In many parts of the United States today, runaways from OOHC, particularly, young women of colour,²¹⁴ are automatically propelled into juvenile detention centres as 'status offenders.'²¹⁵

The 'care-criminalisation'²¹⁶ process is a contemporary example that sees children from OOHC disproportionately impacted upon by aspects of both the care and criminal justice systems in circumstances that would not lead to police involvement in a private family home. Residential care staff's inappropriate reliance on police to manage children's behaviour^{217 218 219} police refusal of bail to

runaway children who offend in the mistaken belief they will not turn up to court^{220 221 222} and judicial decisions to place youth in secure detention to prevent them going missing for their own protection²²³²²⁴ continue the process of the criminalisation of vulnerable children. Outmoded terminology used to refer to missing children in both practice and in the literature: as ‘absconders’, and as ‘recidivist’ repeat offenders²²⁵ underscores this process. In an environment where care-criminalisation occurs, running away from care may form another opportunity for children to be criminalised by coming under increased police scrutiny²²⁶ that otherwise would not have occurred except for going missing.

The intersection of individual and contextual factors is important. Individual characteristics do not operate in isolation. Academic literature, however, can be blind to the complexity of these issues: studies often present individual characteristics without reference to their interplay with external mechanisms, leaving a gap in the research which marginalises or pathologizes the experiences of those who do not fit the dominant narrative. This is seen in the interplay between gender and ethnicity in discussions about the criminalisation of girls in OOHC: a recent study could find just 12 pieces of international literature produced in the last 20 years which had a specific focus on girls who had been both in care and had criminal justice system contact. Of these, just two had discussed the intersection between gender and ethnicity.²²⁷

This omission gives the ‘grey literature’, which comprises reports and material produced by government, charities and agencies working in the field, especial relevance. These reports can provide an additional important perspective on identifying why youth go missing from care, and what happens to them while they are missing.

The context of children’s lives, rather than just their individual demographics, needs to be understood if their running away and going missing is to be addressed. Going missing is often a symptom, rather than the cause, of a problem. The literature is clear: going missing is a sign that something is wrong in a young person’s life. As the National Missing Persons Coordination Centre (NMPCC) has stated:

‘Youth go missing to remove themselves from something that isn’t making them happy. Running away from the problem can seem like the best available option when they have run out of other solutions. For youth who voluntarily go missing, if underlying factors aren’t addressed issues will likely remain and could lead to the young person going missing again.’²²⁸

Social reconnection

A young person may go missing in an attempt to reconnect with important aspects of their life outside of OOHC. A substantial amount of research indicates that a young person's unmet need for their natural or desired social environment has an influence on the decision to leave care. For example, Chapin Hall researchers commented that 'it was striking' how often the reasons for going missing from care, expressed in interviews with 42 youth, 'reflected healthy desires for family connections, social time with peers, or a better life'²²⁹.

The centrality of the family of origin

Running to family

Research has identified the 'centrality of the family of origin' as a key factor in young people's missing events. They described the 'gravitational pull' biological families exerted on young people in care, which was manifested as a deep desire by youth to stay connected, or to re-connect. This was seen in the pattern of missing demonstrated by many youth: when they went missing they generally ran to their families. This drive was essentially a run 'to family' rather than from placement. Youth equated being around biological family as being normal, which they defined as living in a family, in a caring home, and being able to go to their own school and stay in their own neighbourhoods. This was contrasted with the view that being in OOHC was not the same as being in one's own family.

Many of the Chapin Hall interviewees had experienced traumatic life experiences during their time in care. For example:

- 17 percent had had a miscarriage;
- 17 percent had had a sexually transmitted disease;
- 17 percent had had a serious mental illness;
- 17 percent had been incarcerated;
- 14 percent had had one or more pregnancies; and
- Almost a third (29%) had experienced the death of a parent and/or one or more close relatives while in care.

Researchers observed that young people often ran to be with their family or significant others at times of great stress, seeking comfort or familiarity.

They identified a particular subset of youth who went missing from care after experiencing the loss of a close family member: this added 'a dimension to their running that made it both a vehicle to connect with family, and a way of coping with feeling alone after a parent's death.'²³⁰ A similar pattern of going

missing after a family member's death was noted by McFarlane (2015)²³¹ in a study of children's appearances before the NSW Children's Court criminal division.

Other literature has confirmed that young people who go missing from OOHC often return to family and to friends.^{232 233 234}

For example:

- A 1996²³⁵ study of over 2,600 young people in care in California suggested that many multiple exits from care were actually lengthy running episodes and most were unsuccessful attempts at family reunification;
- A 2000 British study²³⁶ of over 272 young people who had run from 32 care settings found that over half (53 percent) had gone missing to be with family or friends;
- A 2002 study²³⁷ reported that almost half (46 percent) of runaways returned to their family and 39 percent ran to a friend; and
- Kim et al (2017)²³⁸ found that youth who know they are unlikely to be reunified with family or relatives and/or be adopted are more likely to go missing and suggested that missing rates might increase around dates significant to a young person, such as a birthday, Christmas or New Year.

A study by James et.al.'s (2008)²³⁹ is one of the few¹⁶Australian works to have specifically looked at young people missing from OOHC. This study found that this group:

- was between 13-17 years of age, were more likely to be female, and had experienced severe family problems, including severe family disruption, severe child abuse, severe school problems, emotional /behavioural difficulties and changes in family dynamics;
- They generally ran away from care in the first few months after placement, likely due to perceived inadequate attention from caregivers and social workers and crowded facilities. Miscommunication and adjustment/attachment difficulties were common. While in OOHC, they likely experienced bullying/sexual harassment and

¹⁶ In addition to a review of Australian and international research and related literature, the report drew on a compilation of national data from police services across Australia, The Salvation Army Family Tracing Service and the Australian Red Cross Tracing Service for 2005–06. Key stakeholders were consulted and completed an online questionnaire, face-to-face interviews were conducted with representatives of 23 organisations in six jurisdictions, and there was a questionnaire for families of missing persons. A national roundtable comprising Steering Committee members, representatives from police, search services and academics was also held.

abusive staff: leaving a placement was often a protest against imposed limits or a cry for help;

- Poor outcomes were common, and included: increased risk of mental health problems/depression, disengagement from school, offending and increased risk of illicit drug and alcohol use. Risks also included homelessness, including rough sleeping, and homelessness that extended into adulthood, as well as an increased risk of becoming a victim of crime.

James et al., found that the young people went missing to return home, and/or returned to their friends or partners. In many cases, workers and carers did not view them as genuinely missing, but as absent or absconders.

Separation from siblings in particular has been shown to cause great distress, and the loss of, or infrequent contact with one's siblings has been given as a reason for why young people in OOHC run away.²⁴⁰ Children's frustration and annoyance at the infrequency of contact with family and friends including siblings is clear in studies that have sought their views.²⁴¹ For example, over a quarter of respondents to a survey²⁴² of young people in care in NSW said they were not satisfied with the level of contact they had with their birth family.

Lack of family contact has been found to be particularly problematic for Indigenous children and young people, many of whom are frequently placed off-country and away from family and community.^{243 244} In 2019, the Independent Family is Culture Review, which conducted an analysis of the case files of all 1,144 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in OOHC in NSW concluded that the child welfare department:

'has lost focus on achieving the fundamental goal of the [Aboriginal Child Placement Principles] keeping children and young people connected to family, community, culture and country and, recognising community as a strength for children'.²⁴⁵

It would be 'an oversimplification' to believe that youth are influenced solely by their attachment to their families of origin. As the Chapin Hall recognised, some youth are deeply antagonistic to their families, feeling they had been rejected, betrayed or hurt by them in the past. However, while these youth view themselves as being on their own, they may still seek out contact in an attempt to heal or create a relationship with their biological family. Many have suffered multiple violations at the hands

of biological family members, at times during their runs home to family, which led to disappointment with both family and the care placement. While family and friends may provide safety and sanctuary, they may themselves present further risks to a youth missing from care: either because they are unable to assist, are abusive, have chaotic lifestyles, or are too vulnerable themselves to offer support.²⁴⁶

The Drive for Autonomy

Rotating to friends and to the streets

Some young people may go missing from OOHC as a normal expression of independence and drive for autonomy and greater freedom, as is typical of their developmental stage.²⁴⁷ The potential for conflict between the drive to autonomy and the restrictive environment of the care system may cause youth to rebel and leave placements without permission.²⁴⁸

According to Chapin Hall²⁴⁹, these youth - predominantly young men living in residential care/group homes - chafed at the rules and restrictions imposed on them in their placements. They rotated to friends and to the streets in a quest for freedom and the need to assert their autonomy and viewed their rejection of the care system's rules and routines as normal.²⁵⁰

This is consistent with the findings of other studies that some youth equate being in care to being in prison, and describe going missing, as escaping.²⁵¹ Many believe they had been rejected by their families and ran to friends or the streets instead. As other studies have found, these young people relied upon their friends and their siblings to fulfil their needs for belonging, safety, and connection.

Touching base to maintain relationships

Another pattern of running from care was that of brief missing periods, designed to check in and maintain relationships with family and to friends and then return to their placements.

Running 'at random'

Another pattern identified by Chapin Hall was a group that ran at random. This was a subset of young people in care – all female – who were missing for between three months to four years, who ran to unfamiliar destinations, and stayed with strangers. They felt uncared for and unattached, and their runs were highly impulsive: seemingly triggered by nearly random opportunities, such as an impulse to see the ocean or an invitation from friends or strangers. They often chose to run with a friend, and

almost exclusively, ran to their friends or to the streets where they met adult males with whom they stayed. Many were subjected to violence and exploitation.

The researchers observed that this group:

‘had experienced an extraordinary number of challenging experiences and traumas, both in their families of origin and during their foster care stays, such as the death and/or incarceration of family members, sexual assaults, miscarriages, giving birth, and having a child removed ... However, when asked why they run, they speak generally about the need for a sense of freedom from stress and worry...What distinguishes this group of youth is the fact that their runs are not marked by their longing for someone from their family of origin or something that they had with friends and siblings that they now miss. Their stories reflect a longing to find something “out there” that they have never experienced but strongly desire. They went to great lengths and travelled long distances in their search....’²⁵²

Detachment

The literature indicates that once it begins, a pattern of going missing is likely to continue.

Detachment²⁵³ has been posited as one explanation for this pattern of repeat missing episodes. Young people who go missing may have become ‘detached’ well before they left home or care. The experience of detachment occurred on the first or second missing incident, and often arose due to the young person’s view, or their reality, that they were not given professional help with the problems they had experienced.

Detachment can also arise when young people frequently go missing and do not typically return to their family or friends. An English study²⁵⁴ estimated that four percent of missing children and young people had drifted or lost contact with other family members when their family moved away or after they had left care placements.

The Australian DHHS review observed that:

‘from a psychological perspective, the experience of detachment or dissociation from one’s environment is often an adaptive response to severe stress or trauma. Symptoms of dissociation may include feeling disconnected, problems handling emotions, thought-related problems (such as concentration and memory issues), identity confusion and

feeling compelled to behave in a certain way...such as avoidance, aggression or dissociation. These responses may be useful to help an individual survive a stressful situation; however, they become problematic when relied upon in other situations such as in a care placement.²⁵⁵

THE CURRENT STUDY

Lack of data

There was very little information provided in the data about why young people went missing: It is unknown if this is a reflection of the process of the data collection undertaken for this particular project, which required considerable manual extraction and recording of information. It could also reflect the more systemic issue of a lack of police intelligence gathering from young people and their carers. One jurisdiction (J6) also withheld information relating to the reasons youth went missing in almost eight percent of all missing youth cases where it was deemed relevant to ongoing police operations.

Thematic analysis

Information about why youth (aged 13-17 years inclusive) went missing from OOHC was available in respect of just over a quarter of reports (n=493). The data relating to children was excluded from analysis due to the small sample size and limited jurisdictional input.

Thematic analysis undertaken on these incidents indicated that youth in OOHC primarily went missing to be with friends or family, or because of concerns about their care placement.

The importance of friends

The most common reason given for why youth went missing from OOHC was to see their friends. The rates varied between jurisdictions: ranging from nine percent (J6) to approximately 27 percent of responses (J4).

A significant limitation of this analysis lies in the lack of distinction made in the data between platonic and sexual relationships, and the lack of information regarding whether these friendships involved other young people, or adults.

Where further analysis was possible, it indicates that youth in OOHC went missing to be with sexual partners at a much higher rate than they did to see platonic friends: for example, in J4, youth in OOHC went missing because of their friends in just under five percent of cases, but went missing to be with their 'boyfriends' or 'girlfriends' in 22 percent of cases. In contrast, data from J1 indicated that young people in OOHC went missing to see their friends (12.4 percent) more often than their boy or girlfriends (2.8 percent).

Caution is urged in considering these findings. Firstly, much of the data relating to why youth in OOHC went missing is incomplete, leaving relatively small sample sizes in each jurisdiction. Secondly, interpretation of the data was based on the project team's analysis of police-collected data, which in turn is reliant on the information contained not just in the missing person reports but also that gleaned from manual checks of the young people's police-held files. Each point in this process was vulnerable to the recorder's interpretation of what youth or their carers told police about the nature of the relationship between a missing youth and his/her 'friends'. Self-censorship by under-age youth, determinations by inexperienced or nervous carers, and condensation of the information provided to the project team by police examining extensive files and often contradictory information, all raise the possibility of error.

Similarly, it was not possible to comment on the nature of the friendships referred to in the files, whether they provide a generally supportive or exploitative environment for young people in care. The literature makes clear that friendship groups are very important to young people in OOHC, and can provide a supportive, nurturing environment that may otherwise be missing in a child's life. The literature also warns however, that youth in OOHC frequently over-estimate friendship bonds, using the term 'friend' to refer to casual acquaintances of one or two hours.

The importance of family

In J6, in a departure from the literature which stresses the importance of family contact to young people in OOHC, just one individual went missing from OOHC in order to be with their family. Other jurisdictions reported rates more consistent with the literature, ranging from 4.5 percent in J3, through to over a quarter of youth in J5.

Other reasons youth went missing

Other reasons for young people in OOHC going missing included mental health concerns, and to 'have fun' (under two percent in two jurisdictions).

Young people also went missing because of concerns about their care placement - this is discussed further in Part 5, the OOHC environment.

PART 5: THE OOHC ENVIRONMENT

CONTEXT

Pre-Care experiences

Running away or going missing from home prior to entry to care has been strongly associated in research with missing behaviour while in care.^{256 257 258} It is argued that young people who go missing from care are continuing a pattern of missing behaviour begun before the child or young person entered the care system. Accordingly, it is seldom presented as reflecting upon the care system itself.

While it is seldom discussed in the literature, this pattern might be an obvious one, given that running away is a reason that children may be taken *into* care²⁵⁹ in both the UK and in the USA. Young people placed in care in New York because of status offences²⁶⁰ go missing more often than foster children placed for other reasons.²⁶¹

Entry to care

The entry to care process may influence subsequent missing episodes from care. Studies have found that the 'removal manner' can be important. For example, young people removed from their family by court orders have been reported as more likely to go missing²⁶² than those placed in care voluntarily.

The experience of coming into care has been described as a terrifying one that can represent the collapse of a child's entire world.²⁶³ It can ensure 'a traumatic beginning to the loss of everything familiar and entry into an institution full of strangers.'²⁶⁴ The process may instill a deep distrust of authority in the minds of some children and their families, leading them to regard involvement with the child welfare system as 'a very negative experience' and regarded 'not as a source of support and security, but as an uncaring bureaucracy, to be feared rather than trusted.'²⁶⁵

Previous care experience

The impact of previous care experience is rarely considered in discussions of missing persons.

Australian police data does not include an indicator that would enable an assessment of the risk factors posed by a history of care. OOHC status is collected only by Victoria, who assess 'current care experience' as one of a series of indicators to determine the risk of harm to a missing person.

The literature is likewise almost completely silent on this aspect. The project team was able to identify only one study where previous care experience was noted. The 2003 study by Biehal, Mitchell and

Wade alluded to the care experience of adult missing people in a study of people reported missing to the National Missing Person Helpline charity during a one-year-period.

The authors observed that a majority of missing adults had run away from home or care frequently as teenagers, and presented a case study of an adult who had spent much of his childhood in care, and who had 'never settled':

'He moved between children's homes, ran away from most and eventually left care at 18 with minimal support. He tried to stay with various relatives but felt in the way and eventually became homeless. His past experiences of family rejection, his feelings of being unloved and unwanted, prompted him to drift from town to town over a period of 10 years.'²⁶⁶

This missing person experienced homelessness, drug use, repeated stints in prison, suffered a nervous breakdown and suffered drug-induced psychosis. He denied he had a family so he wouldn't have to explain his past and present situation to people he met, and said of his most recent missing episode, that:

'When I last went missing I felt it had to be for good because I just felt insecure and unwanted and labelled as a misfit who would never change, so therefore couldn't be helped.'²⁶⁷

The authors concluded that persistent running away in adolescence can lead to homelessness into adulthood and noted that 'people making the transition from living in an institution to living in the community, such as those leaving care, the armed forces or prison, also experienced problems that sometimes led them to drift into a transient lifestyle'.²⁶⁸

Concern about the OOHC environment

The views of youth in OOHC

Young people in OOHC present a host of reasons why they go missing from care. This illustrates that the care population is not heterogenous, and that there are a multitude of different individual characteristics, backgrounds and experiences that shape someone's decision to go missing. However, the 2006 report of the UK's Office of the Children's Rights Director²⁶⁹ (the 'OCD') found that young people ran away from care essentially because 'they are unhappy'.

Unhappiness develops in many ways: when young people felt they were treated just as part of a group rather than as an individual, because staff did not let them do things, and because they were separated from their brothers and sisters, or from another young person in a home with whom they have grown attached. Lack of privacy, boredom, frustration at rules, fear of punishments, resentment of staff who were seen as unsupportive or indifferent, anger at being criminalised, feeling unsafe in care, 'running away from problems, drugs, alcohol, bullying', the desire to see and be with family and friends, as well as the wish to 'simply to go and have fun while on the run for a while...[with] no adults there to tell you off all the time'²⁷⁰ were all cited as reasons why youth left their care placements.

Put simply, the OCRD concluded, young people went missing from care:

- because they could not cope with things happening in their placement;
- to be with somebody they wanted to be with, or go somewhere they wanted to stay; or
- to simply to have some fun and then come back.

A more detailed list of reasons was compiled by the OCRD six years later from the results of focus groups and interviews with hundreds of children in care across England and Wales.²⁷¹ In no particular order, these reasons were:

- anger
- stress
- pressure
- to get space to calm down
- being deeply annoyed
- being unhappy with being in care
- being afraid of or not liking those they are living with
- to avoid bullies
- finding a placement too strange
- being unable to settle in or not liking it
- changes in the people in charge of the placement
- trying to escape police
- not getting what they wanted or needed
- wanting a new start somewhere else
- not being listened to, being afraid
- to get attention and overcome invisibility
- family issues or problems

- not seeing family
- not being allowed to go home
- because of curfews and rules
- to avoid staff they didn't like or trust
- when relationships in placements broke down
- to avoid going into care or to a new placement
- to escape violence, arguments and conflict
- because they were unable to cope
- felt unsafe and lonely
- to test carers to see if they care
- anxiety about their own behaviour or actions or
- because they want to stay out.

The ORCD observed that while some running came about because of the culmination of a variety of issues that built up over time, other episodes were spontaneous and undertaken without much thought. As one young respondent noted:

'if you are running away from problems where you live, you don't usually plan to run, but you simply run when things just get on top of you: 'you don't think you are going to run away – it just happens.'²⁷²

A 2014 study²⁷³ utilised young people as peer interviewers of care-experienced youth in the belief that this would lead to more open conversations and honest disclosures than interviews led by adults. It reported that young people went missing because of their concerns about the quality and stability of their placements. Tensions around authority, friction with others, and environmental issues such as boredom and isolation.

Respondents also stressed the need to have someone sympathetic to talk to. This supports the point made in an earlier US study²⁷⁴ that young people said that they would not have run away if long-standing problems related to their placement had been resolved, or if an alternative placement had been offered.

The 2015 DHHS review notes that running away 'can be a literal 'flight' reaction to stress and trauma', which should be understood 'as an attempt at coping and surviving even when it leads to the opposite

for the child'.²⁷⁵ Although it regarded the evidence base as limited, it pointed to a number of causes commonly identified as underpinning missing events among youth in OOHC. One of the 'exploratory' factors highlighted in this review included difficulty with the care placement environment, arising from:

- anticipated fear of rejection and abandonment from caregivers;
- weak relationships with caregivers;
- unfamiliarity with, or no experience of, caregiver concern, and the boundaries and rules imposed;
- communication or relationship difficulties with foster caregivers;
- a sense of unhappiness in the placement;
- anxiety and distress from the institutional nature of the residential environment; and
- the culture of the residential unit (and specifically, little structure and staff authority, a mixture of clients who are difficult for staff to manage, negative peer pressure to go missing for group acceptance and/or to avoid bullying).

The DHHS review found heightened vulnerability among young people in the child protection and OOHC systems, arising from parental inability to provide a childhood safe haven or secure base. Multiple placement changes in OOHC suggests that these 'youth are probably still seeking these necessities in life.' It suggested that children in OOHC 'are more likely to take...risks more often, to a greater degree of danger and with less support'.²⁷⁶

In its review of the literature on going missing, the AIC stated that young people who go missing from OOHC 'are largely rebelling against authority, the friction experienced with staff or other residents, isolation or other socio-environmental factors'.²⁷⁷ While young people who run away from home are also rebelling against the authority of parents or other adults, they also go missing 'to *avoid more serious family conflict and escape family and domestic violence, physical and sexual abuse*'²⁷⁸ (my italics).

While the conclusions in the DHHS review and the AIC reports discussed above are not incorrect, they are limited, in that they portray only some of the reasons identified in both domestic and international research that children and young people may go missing from care. Both publications attribute motivations to young people who go missing from their family home – such as being compelled or pushed to leave in order to escape familial abuse - that are not extended to young people who go

missing from OOHC. The idea that OOHC placements may not be safe, and for many are abusive, is not considered.

In this respect, these publications echo the attitudes evident in Wilson's 1982 *Runaway Behaviour*.²⁷⁹ This NSW report summarized a year-long study of 120 runaways, who had run away before the age of 16. It set out four categories of young runaway, including 'escapees' - young people who had absconded from institutional settings or foster homes rather than from their parental homes.

The escapees were usually male and aged between 16 and 18 years of age when interviewed. Almost half (42 percent) had first left home when they were six to nine years of age, and 50 percent had lived with foster parents, of whom they were usually 'resentful'. They had long histories of going missing (58 percent had absconded six or more times), and over two thirds (67 percent) had been involved in crime. Over half had been charged with relatively serious criminal offences during the time they were last away from home or an institution, and 83 percent had been through the juvenile court system. Escapees, Wilson concluded:

'...deliberately seek a stimulating lifestyle...and are unconcerned about the consequences of their runaway behaviour...as a group they are familiar with institutions from an early age, and so see incarceration as inevitable. They have had little or no contact with their natural parents and find it difficult to relate to others in any emotionally mature way'.²⁸⁰

Although Wilson purported to present the views of young people as they described their experiences, rather than as mediated through the eyes of researchers, agencies or commentators, his own biases and views are apparent. For example, while he acknowledged that runaways from family situations might be victims of serious abuse, more selfish and cavalier motivations were ascribed to children running away from institutional care. These children, some as young as six years of age, were dismissed as attention-seekers desperate for excitement. This fundamentally misrepresented the circumstances of many young people who go missing. Most significantly, it completely discounted the possibility that these children, just like children running from their own homes, may have been victims of abuse while in care.

Inquiries into abuse in OOHC

Abuse in OOHC has been identified however, in the grey literature. In 1989 the UK's Children's Society²⁸¹ reported that problems in care accounted for 25 percent of the reasons given for why youth

left their placement, and suggested that a fairly high level of both physical and sexual abuse in care may have prompted some young people to run away. In 1992 the National Children's Home²⁸² study reported that some youth went missing from residential care when it failed to meet their needs, and also cautioned that there was a risk of the abuse of children in care, noting that abuse is often a feature of the situation from which young people run away generally. In 1997, the UK's Department of Health's 'Utting Report'²⁸³ confirmed that young people who complained of abuse had not been believed, and had often been returned to the same abusive placements that they had run away from. In 2012, perpetrators of child sexual exploitation were found to have deliberately targeted care placements.²⁸⁴

In Australia, between 1990 and 2017, at least six national and 18 state and territory inquiries included a focus on the quality of care provided to children in OOHC in Australia.²⁸⁵ In 2020 alone, at least four inquiries into aspects of various jurisdictions' OOHC systems were announced: the issue of youth reported as missing or absent from residential care in Victoria²⁸⁶; residential care placement decisions in Western Australia²⁸⁷; historical institutional abuse in Tasmania²⁸⁸; and the protocols and reporting practices of the Department for Child Protection in relation to sexual abuse of girls in care in South Australia.²⁸⁹

Criticisms made in the course of investigations into the OOHC system have often been scathing. For example, the 1989 national Burdekin Inquiry into Homeless Children identified that perpetrators of child sexual exploitation had deliberately targeted OOHC placements.²⁹⁰

In 2008 the South Australian Mullighan Children in State Care Commission of Inquiry ('the CISC') found that sexual abuse had 'occurred in every type of care from the 1940s onwards...to the present' including institutional care, smaller group care, residential care units, foster care, family care, and in secure care facilities.²⁹¹

In 2015 the Victorian Commissioner for Children and Young People identified serious systemic failures in that state's care system, including 'widespread problems of sexual exploitation and violence, poor health and educational outcomes, disconnection from family and culture and disproportionate rates of trauma among children in state care'.²⁹² The 2018 independent Tune Review of the NSW child welfare system also reported that despite 'significant government spending', interventions were not evidence-based, and not tailored to meet the individual and diverse needs of vulnerable children. As a result, the OOHC system was 'failing to improve long-term outcomes for children and arrest

devastating cycles of intergenerational abuse and neglect'.²⁹³ The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) has also expressed serious concerns at 'widespread reports of inadequacies and abuse' within the OOHC system, citing the inappropriate placements of children; inadequate screening, training, support and assessment of carers, placement of Indigenous children outside their communities, and the mental health issues 'exacerbated by (or caused in) care'.²⁹⁴

The national Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Abuse²⁹⁵ identified that a range of factors allowed perpetrators to exploit opportunities to abuse vulnerable children in OOHC. These included separation from family, unstable placements, isolation and a lack of relationships with reliable, safe adults. The Royal Commission made over 30 recommendations aimed at improving Australia's OOHC system so that children are less likely to be sexually abused while they are under the state's protection. Significantly, it recommended that federal and state governments collect information about children who were found to have been sexually abused while in OOHC, as well as information about their characteristics and the alleged abuse. It also recommended the establishment of a nationally consistent approach to service delivery, recording, reporting, and information sharing for child sexual abuse in care.

The adverse childhood experiences in OOHC can have a long-lasting and devastating impact. As discussed in the series of inquiries conducted by the Commonwealth's Community Affairs References Committee^{296 297 298 299 300} for many people, placement in OOHC exposed them to institutional abuse and neglect, criminalisation, the imposition of a criminal record, increased chances of poverty, unemployment and substance abuse, and increased likelihood of incarceration.

Despite these many inquiries, there is still no reliable Australian national data on the number of notifications, investigations and substantiations of abuse that takes place when a child is in OOHC.³⁰¹ This is a very real concern, for as Payne noted of the UK in the mid 1990s, there is a 'tendency to ignore the fact that going missing may be a sign of abuse or violence in a...care home'³⁰² A consequence of police ignoring the possibility that a young person has gone missing from care in order to escape abuse, is that investigators might assume:

'that returning to the status quo before a person goes missing is the 'right' outcome. This sometimes leads us to return people...back to residential care without investigating the reasons for their behaviour and taking action to protect them appropriately. It is

important to examine implications for practice and the need for active responses by social service agencies to the issue of people 'going missing.'³⁰³

Type of placement

Residential Care (Group Homes)

US research has identified that residential care (also known group home care and congregate care) is associated with higher rates of running away or going missing than other forms of care.^{304 305 306}

Chapin Hall researchers have argued that:

'Intuitively, this is not difficult to understand when one considers some of the basic differences between group homes and family foster care, including: a high ratio of youth to adults, a less family-like environment, rules that are less individualized to youth personalities and needs, rotating staff, and a clientele who did not succeed in family foster care, often due to behavior problems'.³⁰⁷

English research has also found that although residential care comprises just seven percent of the OOHC system, young people living in this form of placement are disproportionately likely to go missing or run away. They also go missing more frequently^{308 309} and are three times more likely to go missing overnight than youth living with their birth families.³¹⁰

Researchers have pointed to the various characteristics of the residential care system that make it more likely that someone will go missing from this form of care than any other. For example, studies commonly point to the lack of free movement and autonomy in residential care as a reason for young people going missing. In many jurisdictions, youth are not permitted to have a key to the home so cannot come and go as they please, and as might be fitting to their age.³¹¹ They may be refused permission to go out at night or stay overnight with friends if there are not enough staff to pick them up from a night out.³¹²

A multitude of studies have pointed to the importance of peer relationships, particularly in residential care, in reducing the risk that children will run away if they feel they are safe or welcome. Young people in residential care however, regularly report that they feel unsafe, and that peer violence, bullying and abuse is a regular part of their lives.^{313 314 315 316 317 318 319 320}

Young people in residential care in Australia have been found to be at increased risk for going missing. For example, unpublished data supplied to the Victorian Auditor General by the Department of Human

Services showed incidents in residential care had increased in just a few years, due mainly to ‘a marked increase in absent or missing persons reports’.³²¹ The Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry (2013)³²² has stated that going missing from OOHC is ‘a symptom of a residential system under strain’.

In 2019 a national survey³²³ of young people aged 8-17 years living in OOHC reported that while the vast majority (92 percent) felt both safe and settled in their current placement, youth living in residential care were less positive about their placement.¹⁷ Concern about safety has been expressed in other Australian studies however:

- A report³²⁴ produced for the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse identified that most children and young people currently living in residential care said that ‘they were not safe and did not feel safe’;
- The NSW Residential Care Survey³²⁵ found that more than a quarter (28 percent) of youth in residential care did not feel safe or settled;
- The Australian Capital Territory’s Children’s Commissioner³²⁶ reported that almost 30 percent of children in residential care had expressed concerns about their safety;
- The Queensland Commission for Children and Young People³²⁷ found that 57 percent of respondents said they did not feel completely safe in their placement, mainly due to other young people in the placement; and
- The Tasmanian Children’s Commissioner³²⁸ reported that young people’s fear of not being believed, or of adults not taking action, was a key reason why they would not disclose abuse.

Given the consistency of poor outcomes identified in the literature, it has been proposed that the incidence of running away could be reduced by limiting the use of residential care.³²⁹

Following Australian media exposes regarding abuse and the targeting of young people in care by sexual predators,^{330 331 332} various government have stated they will discontinue the use of residential or group home care.^{333 334 335} Instead, children and young people will be accommodated in intensive or

¹⁷ The OOHC survey comprised a sample of 13 percent of the Australian OOHC population, the majority of whom were living in foster care (42 percent) or in kinship care (42 percent) at the time. The survey had to be completed in the presence of a support person or staff member, which raises some concerns as to the ability of respondents to answer freely when those responsible for their care were present.

therapeutic residential care, which promises to deliver a ‘high level of professional and targeted support’³³⁶ to enable [young people] to transition back to family, kinship or foster care, or move to independent living.

However, as was clearly demonstrated in NSW in the 1990s when scandals engulfed its flagship residential facilities promising therapeutic intensive support for children with behavioural problems,³³⁷ simply replacing one model of care with another can be problematic. Reforming the OOHC system requires ‘deep consideration to ensure that the mistakes of the past are not repeated in the future, and that the alternatives do not create a new set of problems.’³³⁸

Recent reviews: New South Wales

In 2017 the NSW Office of the Children’s Guardian (the ‘NSW OCG’) reviewed the circumstances of 185 children and young people living in residential care.¹⁸ The sample included all 110 children under the age of 12 years, and a random sample of the remaining children and young people.

The NSW OCG noted that there were ‘frequent’ reports of children and young people missing from residential care: approximately 14 percent of the youth ‘had a serious history of absconding from placements (frequently absconding from placements or a history of absconding across a number of different placements)’.³³⁹

Most of the significant risk of harm reports received about the residential care group were made in relation to youth’s risk-taking behaviour while *away* from their placements, including drug and alcohol use and prostitution (my emphasis).

The NSW OCG did not discuss why the youth went missing from care: it merely provided the statistics. However, given that literature clearly reports that youth may go missing from a placement if they feel it is unsafe or unsatisfactory, it is significant that over a third (36 percent) had complained of sexual misconduct or serious physical assault while they were in the residential care placement.

Some 240 allegations, involving 67 victims, were reviewed by the NSW OCG. Over 17 percent of the allegations involved ‘sexual misconduct’ (such as crossing professional boundaries, grooming or

¹⁸ Residential care is considered to be unsuitable for children under the age of 12 years, and agencies providing residential care to children under the age of 12 years must notify the Children’s Guardian. Children under the age of 12 years may be placed in residential care in circumstances where their needs cannot be met in a family placement, or where the child is part of a larger sibling group and residential care is thought to be the most appropriate arrangement to keep the group together.

sexually explicit comments or overtly sexual behaviour). The most frequently reported concern involved 'inappropriate contact between staff and children and young people on social media or via mobile phones, often of a sexually explicit nature'.³⁴⁰ Approximately eight percent of the allegations involved serious physical assault.

The NSW OCG seemed to attribute the abuse to casual staff moving between agencies: it recommended a register of residential care workers be established and noted that 'reforms to the residential care system and the implementation of the promised intensive therapeutic care system explicitly preclude the use of casual staff in therapeutic residential care settings.'³⁴¹

Other factors which may 'push' young people into going missing from OOHC were also evident in the NSW OCG report. For example, young people continued to be placed in residential care due to the limited alternative placement options. They experienced high rates of placement instability, especially Indigenous children, who were almost twice as likely as non-Aboriginal youth to have had ten or more placement changes before their current placement in residential care or temporary emergency care.

None of the Indigenous young people had been placed with Aboriginal service providers and had frequently been placed off-country and away from family and community. Cultural support plans were described as tokenistic, and birth family contact was sporadic.

Recent reviews: The Northern Territory

The Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory (the 'NT Royal Commission')³⁴² found that young people in residential care were often disengaged from support services, education and pro-social influences, and dislocated from family, culture and community. Their time in residential care was characterised by frequent absconding, substance abuse, offending and other high-risk behaviours, often undertaken in the company of other children in OOHC. Staff relied on police to control children's behaviour.

The NT Royal Commission heard evidence that young people would stay out all night or abscond from placements for weeks or more. It found that many left placements to return to family or kin, and that 'self-placing' was a notable issue for the Territory, with a lack of appropriate planning and action to address the safety of children who self-placed from care. It recommended that:

‘more needs to be done to reduce the level of absconding and to locate promptly and monitor children who self-place. To assist with this, there should be clear procedures to respond to absconding with a collaborative interagency approach involving Territory Families and the police working together to find and support these children’.³⁴³

Just two years later, the Northern Territory Commission for Children and Young People (2019) (the ‘NT CCYP’)³⁴⁴ reported that Territory Families had failed to comply with its own procedures and requirements in relation to the case management of young people in residential care. It found that Territory Families had not investigated all allegations of abuse arising from the use of physical force and restraints in care or ensured adequate family involvement in case planning and leaving care plans. The NT CCYP also reported that staff lacked knowledge and information about young people’s health and wellbeing requirements, and as a result young people had not received the necessary NDIS support to which they were entitled.

Recent reviews: South Australia

The South Australian Office of the Guardian for Children and Young People (the ‘SA GCYP’) has, over several years, raised concerns about the high rates of young people going missing from residential care.¹⁹

In 2007 the SA GCYP’s unpublished review of the circumstances of 55 young people in residential care reported that 29 percent of the cohort frequently went missing (more than five times in three months) and all were regarded as being at high risk.³⁴⁵

In 2014 the SA GCYP reported that 3,123 missing person reports had been made about youth in residential care in a 12-month period. Approximately 63 percent of the reports were made by the large units, which accommodated less than a quarter of the total residential care population group.³⁴⁶ There were approximately 5.7 incidents per child across the smaller residential units, compared to 24.8 incidents per child in the larger units. The disproportion was attributed, in part, to the older median age in the larger residential units.

¹⁹ Less than 10 percent of SA’s OOHC population live in residential care. Most of the residential units house up to four residents, aged 0-18 years, with a total capacity of 200 residents. SA also maintains large residential units operated by the Department for Education and Child Development that can accommodate 8 -12 residents in each unit, with a total capacity of 80 residents. An average of 62-66 young people live in SA’s large residential units at any one time. Their age typically ranges from 11 to 17 years, with a median age of 14 years. Some of the units are single gender, others house both males and females.

In 2015³⁴⁷ the SA GCYP reported on its review of reports relating to both absences without permission and missing reports concerning children and young people in residential care.

Policy was changed during the reporting period. Introducing a dual track missing regime, a 'Guardianship Absentee Report' was filed if staff were of the opinion the young people were safe. A young person was considered a 'missing person' if they were thought to be at high or extreme-risk and an urgent response was required.²⁰

A total of 1,764 absences without permission, and 752 missing person reports, were recorded in a six-month period. It is not known how many individual children these figures related to or how accurate staff assessments of the safety of children designated 'absent' was. The SA GCYP observed that some residential units reported no absent or missing episodes, while others had recorded large numbers of both.

It also noted residential care staff complaints about the difficulty of keeping residents safe when other youth 'persuade or coerce each other into engaging in high-risk activity off-site'.³⁴⁸ Staff reported that youth frequently left care together and went missing regularly.

Children and young people described serious episodes of violence, staff being assaulted, and police being called, the use of restraints, and the generally negative and unhappy atmosphere of some units. They spoke about being intimidated by other residents, coerced into becoming involved in high-risk incidents, and discussed the impact that violent behaviour, absconding and substance abuse had on them.

The SA GCY reported that children and young people living in large residential units said they ran away because:

- of issues relating to the management of their care,
- they did not want to live in residential care,
- they were scared of other residents in placement,
- they wanted to seek contact or reunion with family,
- they wanted some fun, or

²⁰ This distinction came about in 2013-14, when Families SA and SAPOL implemented a new missing person's practice guide, which focused on assessing a child's risk factors and urgency for response if, and when they go missing from placement. A trial was held in 2012-13.

- they needed to meet an emotional/psychological need (for example, as a coping strategy).

The SA GCYP had previously noted that ‘placement transition’ - the process whereby young people in care become aware they are leaving a placement, through to the move itself, to a point of adjustment in a new placement – was a time of vulnerability and discomfort that could translate into going missing from care and other self-injurious or avoidant behaviour.³⁴⁹

The SA GCYP reported residential care agencies had failed to comply with a mandated requirement to document responses to missing youth. The SA GCYP said it had been impossible to judge the proportionality or appropriateness of agency responses, because the only consequences documented in the critical incident reports able to be reviewed were agency call-outs to police.²¹ The SA GCYP recommended that critical incident reports should routinely record if consequences for poor behaviour were imposed and what the consequences were, so that managers and external monitors can judge proportionality and fairness.³⁵⁰

The SA GCYP has reported that it has continued to receive information about serious issues and concerns about large-scale residential facilities, including young people going missing for extended periods of time and residents’ exposure to the criminal justice system.³⁵¹ However, while the 2016 Nyland Royal Commission criticised the state’s lack of progress in implementing the recommendations of the 2008 Mullighan State Commission of Inquiry regarding youth missing from care, the SA GCYP itself has not published further details about missing episodes.

In December 2020, the South Australian government announced an independent inquiry into the protocols and reporting practices of the Department for Child Protection following the sexual abuse of girls in residential OOHHC.³⁵² The Inquiry is to report to government by the 9th February 2021.

²¹ Staff at the smaller units, which catered for younger children, said they imposed ‘natural consequences’ in response to missing incidents, such as removing a child from a group activity, sending them to bed early, removing toys or Nintendos, imposing additional chores, and imposing time-in a child’s room based on the child’s age. Staff at units housing older youth said they attempted to prevent residents from going missing by adopting a ‘welcome home’ approach, offering food and encouragement to residents when they returned home regardless of the time of day.

Recent reviews: Victoria

In March 2020 the Victorian Commission for Children and Young People (the 'VIC CCYP') announced it would be holding an inquiry into young people who are absent or missing from residential care.³⁵³

In May 2020 the VIC CCYP announced that it had extended the terms of reference to enable it to specifically examine missing episodes that occurred during the COVID-19 lockdown period, following reports from Victoria Police that indicated a 30 percent increase in missing from care reports on the previous month.³⁵⁴

The VIC CCYP has observed that the most frequently reported concern noted in adverse incident reports²² relate to youth reported absent or missing from care: thirteen percent of reports involving young people case-managed by the department, and 28 percent of incidents involving young people case-managed by department-funded agencies, were about this issue.³⁵⁵ The majority of reports relate to youth in residential care, although only five percent of the OOHC population live in this type of placement. In 2019, some 1500 missing person reports involved young people in OOHC: of these, approximately 450 reports related to just 10 children.³⁵⁶

Surveys and interviews with youth in residential care in Victoria indicate that they commonly experience multiple placements and interact with a highly casualised and poorly trained workforce with whom they find it difficult to form positive relationships. Youth have reported that their physical living environment can be impersonal, sterile, run-down and feel more like a prison than a home, and that personal possessions are often stolen or destroyed by other residents. Echoing the concerns expressed by young people in residential care in other Australian jurisdictions, Victorian young people have reported feeling unsafe, unvalued, and unheard.³⁵⁷

These findings are not new: previous research undertaken by the VIC CCYP has found that youth placed in residential care experienced sexual and criminal exploitation, and an escalation in undesirable behaviours, including going missing.³⁵⁸

²² Pursuant to section 60A of the *Commission for Children and Young People Act 2012*, the Commission receives incident reports in relation to adverse incidents relating to children and young people in foster care, kinship care, residential care, lead-tenant settings and secure welfare services. This includes reports on missing episodes.

Semi-independent accommodation and other temporary placements

In the UK, young people in OOHC may be placed in 'independent living' arrangements (such as in a flat, lodgings, bedsit, bed and breakfast accommodation, or with friends) either with or without formal support. They may also be housed in 'semi-independent' accommodation (such as hostels, YMCAs, lodgings, flats and bedsits). This form of placement is not subject to the children's homes regulations, however supervisory staff or advice workers, who are not required to live on the premises, are employed and available to provide advice and support. Youth may also be housed in temporary placements such as boats, holiday cottages and caravans, although this is meant to be for holiday or leisure purposes only and not as permanent arrangements.

The poor standard of supervision and care provided, coupled with the risk that youth, especially those placed out of area and trafficked children, are particularly vulnerable to criminal and sexual exploitation and are regularly going missing, has been identified in the literature.^{359 360} It has also been the subject of nationwide media attention.^{361 362} A campaign to have these forms of accommodation prevented as care placements is underway.

The placement of young people in OOHC in temporary accommodation also occurs in Australia. In 2017 the NSW Office of the Children's Guardian³⁶³ (the 'NSW OCG') reviewed records relating to 352 children and young people who had been placed in motel or other similar, temporary accommodation in the previous six months. The NSW OCG stated that motel accommodation is used across NSW to meet placement shortages in the OOHC system. These care arrangements most commonly involve a child or young person placed on their own, or as part of a sibling group, in a motel under the supervision of workers employed by non-designated agencies such as non-placement support services. Importantly, 'these agencies are not required to meet the same standards of care as accredited OOHC providers'.³⁶⁴

The NSW OCG expressed serious concerns regarding the suitability of temporary care arrangements, noting that supervising staff often lacked the skills and experience to care for highly vulnerable children and young people. It also observed that just under half of the children were under 12 years of age, and that five percent of youth placed in this form of accommodation had 'a significant history of psychiatric issues including self-harm and suicide attempts requiring admission to a psychiatric hospital for treatment'.³⁶⁵ The NSW OCG made no comment on the risks of sexual or criminal child exploitation and did not discuss the prevalence or reasons for youth going missing from these forms of care.

Foster Care

There has been little research conducted into the issues affecting children who go missing from non-residential types of care, such as foster care. Foster care is however, generally regarded as less criminogenic than residential or group home care, producing better functioning adults in terms of criminal arrests and convictions than those who have spent some or all of their time in group settings. This apparent success seems to depend on what it is measured against: for example, a Colorado study found that children in foster care were over six times as likely to be involved with the justice system as those living in kinship care with relatives.³⁶⁶

The limited research specifically on foster care has meant that there is little understanding of the prevalence of missing episodes and individuals in foster care. The studies that have been conducted indicate as follows:

- The Chapin Hall's (2005) study of administrative records relating to 14,000 youth who ran from OOHC between 1993 and 2003, as well as interviews with 42 youth who had a history of running from care and 16 key informants, including foster parents, found that youth in foster care or those living with relatives were less likely to run away than those in residential homes;
- UK researchers Biehal and Wade (2000) estimated that at least 5 percent of children in foster care went missing in a 12 month period, but observed that that social workers' recording of missing incidents in foster care was 'hit and miss';³⁶⁷
- UK researchers Hayden and Goodship reported that the majority (58 percent) of foster carers interviewed in a small study of 29 placements, had a child go missing from their care in one year. Over three-quarters (78 percent) of the foster carers said that at some point in their career, children had gone missing from their care.³⁶⁸

Little is known about whether the motivations for young people going missing differ depending the type of care in which they live. Interviews with a small sample of foster carers revealed that carers attributed the motives for children in their care to go missing as the desire for excitement, liking attention from police, wanting to see family and friends, and because:

'they don't like school...they don't know the placement and they want to get home, they run to their pimp, they run to their best mates because that's where they've stayed for the last two weeks and they liked it there, they run to the previous foster carer, any number of reasons'.³⁶⁹

The research did not however, cite any foster carers suggesting that youth might go missing because they were unhappy in their placement, had received poor care, or had been neglected or abused. The views of young people in foster care who had gone missing were not presented. This omission is problematic in light of Australian research from the 1990s³⁷⁰ which challenged departmental estimates of the incidence of abuse of children by their foster parents as a gross under-estimate. The authors noted a 'disturbing' level of abuse, and observed that the children who made allegations of maltreatment had difficulty in gaining access to, and being believed by staff, and that their fears of not being listened to, as well as the fear of the consequences of speaking out, made disclosure of abuse unlikely.

It has also been suggested that:

'while the problem of running away from residential care is clearly a major issue, and running away from foster care was much less significant... trends in child care practice which emphasize foster care for increasingly difficult children might in future lead to more going missing from foster care. Much the same issues as for residential care arise; in addition, a significant level of running away might lead agencies to question the foster care option in difficult cases, which might lead to less good care for some young people who, while having many difficulties, might benefit personally from foster care'.³⁷¹

A lifetime histories study of a seven-year birth cohort of young people in OOHC in Florida³⁷² found that 19 percent had gone missing at least once during their time in care. Young people missing from foster care were more likely to be victims of human trafficking (for either labour or sexual purposes) than youth who went missing from other types of placement.

Kinship care

Very little is known about youth who go missing from kinship care although there is some evidence that suggests that placement in a relative foster home as opposed to a non-relative foster home can substantially reduce the risk of running away.³⁷³

A recent Victorian study³⁷⁴ of 300 young people involved in both the child welfare and criminal justice systems found that young people who went missing from the family home or from kinship care were often escaping family violence, physical or emotional abuse, and family conflict over their substance use or sexual identity or development. Some youth absconded from one caregiver to another, for instance a kinship carer to a parent, or from one parent to the other.

Out-of-Area placements

The risk of going missing from out-of-area placements²³ has been identified in the UK literature since at least the early 1990s.³⁷⁵ In 2019, the All Party Parliamentary Group on Children Missing from Care³⁷⁶ (the 'APPG') reported that young people living out-of-area were at increased risks as being isolated, and exploited by both opportunistic adults and predatory, organised criminal exploitation gangs. Young people who were moved away from their home area lost contact with family and friends, had their education disrupted and were de-prioritised for assistance, such as mental health services. Often children were placed in care away from their home area not because it was in their best interests, but because there were no local placements available. Children were found to have gone missing from their placements because they were unhappy and traumatised and had had their lives disrupted. They were enticed to go missing by people seeking to exploit them.

The APPG found that between 1 April 2017 and 31 March 2018, children went missing from care an average of 6.1 incidents per child. Between 2015 to 2018 there was a 31 percent increase in children missing from in-area placements. National data on the number of children who go missing from out-of-area placements is not published, but 41 percent of incidents of children missing from children's homes alone relate to children missing from out of area.

The APPG also found that police often were not made aware of vulnerable children placed in care in their areas; that children missing from out of area placements were less likely to receive a return interview, and if one was provided, the information from the interview was often not shared with the police and other safeguarding partners.

The placement of vulnerable youth away from their local areas was labelled a national scandal: the APPG declared that vulnerable children 'are suffering additional trauma because local authorities – the very people tasked with keeping them safe – are sending them away'.³⁷⁷

Placement instability

Placement instability has been demonstrated to be a risk factor for going missing. For example, Lin (2012)³⁷⁸ found youth missing from care had an average of six placements. Kim et al (2015)³⁷⁹ found that multiple experiences of placement instability have an influence on missing episodes, which is

²³ An 'out-of-area' placement is a term used to refer to children's living arrangements in England and Wales that do not sit in or near the geographical boundaries of the agency that has legal responsibility for a child in OOHC. Children placed more than 50 miles away from their local neighbourhood - 20 miles in many cases – are regarded as being placed out-of-area.

consistent with a Chapin Hall³⁸⁰ study that estimated that each additional placement increased the risk of going missing by 70 percent.

Chapin Hall researchers also found that placement history mattered, with the odds of running away higher for youth who moved between levels of care than for those whose did not. A placement change that involved moving from a family setting such as kinship or foster care to a congregate setting such as group home or residential facility was defined as a step up; the converse path was defined as a step down. They suggested that one explanation for the greater likelihood of running away among youth who experienced a change in level of care is that youth run away from OOHC when the type of care in which they are placed is not meeting their treatment and service needs. They concluded that '[i]f this explanation is correct, then states could potentially reduce the incidence of running away by improving how the needs of youth are assessed when they enter care and how youth are matched to placement types based on those assessments.'³⁸¹

Placement instability has also been identified as a risk factor for involvement in the criminal justice system³⁸² at least for males,³⁸³ and has been associated with incarceration for a violent or serious offence during adolescence.³⁸⁴ It is also a risk factor for child sexual exploitation. The DHHS review³⁸⁵ recommended therefore, that 'intervention should focus on strengthening the quality and viability of the placement or planning for a permanent or long-term placement.

Time in placement

Time in placement has also been considered as a factor in the patterns of young people going missing from care. However, although it has been seen as important to identify the point at which a young person is most likely to go missing,³⁸⁶ particularly if this information could assist to identifying when to intervene before missing incident occurs, there is little longitudinal research on this issue.

Courtney and Wong (1996)³⁸⁷ Fasulo et al. (2002)³⁸⁸ and Lin (2012)³⁸⁹ found that the likelihood of running was greatest in the first few months in OOHC: beyond this point, the risk dropped off and stabilized. However, Nesmith (2002)³⁹⁰ found the opposite: observing that the risk of going missing increased the longer that a young person was in OOHC. An Israeli study by Attar-Schwartz (2013)³⁹¹ identified a positive relationship between going missing from care and the length of stay.

Drawing on a database containing the records of approximately 3 million children and young people in OOHC across 21 states²⁴, Chapin Hall analysed a subset of 53,610 records to determine how many

²⁴ The sample comprised youth people who (1) entered foster care for the first time between January 1, 2009 and December 31, 2011, were observed through December 31, 2015 and (2) had at least one out-of-home care spell

young people ran away from their placement in their first spell in OOHC. 'Running away' was defined as a caregiver's report that a child or young person was absent from placement without permission. The researchers found that 17 percent of the cohort (n=8,109) had run away at least once during their first period in OOHC.³⁹²

The lack of services, planning and assessments

The lack of rehabilitative services such as screening, counselling, and treatment - provided to youth in OOHC has been suggested leading to a higher rate of running behaviour among young people in care.³⁹³

Chapin Hall researchers found that whether a child has a permanency plan while in care was associated with the risk that a young person will go missing.³⁹⁴ They also found that young people in OOHC were less likely to go missing if their state had a screening or risk assessment process for youth entering care to determine their risk for running away, than if the state did not. This finding led to a recommendation that jurisdictions institute a screening or assessment process to identify high-risk youth.³⁹⁵

The Education system

While the relationship is complex, difficulty with the education system appears to influence missing events.³⁹⁶ Non-attendance patterns can develop either before going missing or following placement. UK researchers Broad et al³⁹⁷ identified a number of factors thought to contribute to young people detaching from education after entering OOHC.

Byrne (2012) noted that delinquency and problems with school attendance have a reciprocal relationship with going missing and with homelessness, meaning they may be both a cause and a consequence. The Canadian study described that problems with education may contribute to a young person's likelihood of going missing, this in turn may affect school performance as homeless youth may be more likely to miss class and fall behind other students. Byrne observed that educational strengths emerged as a significant predictor of going missing, which presents an opportunity for prevention as 'youth may be at a lower risk of running when connected with a school system that meets his or her individual learning needs'.³⁹⁸

that began when they were between 13 and 17 years old. The cohort was drawn from the Multistate Foster Care Data Archive (FCDA) which is a longitudinal database kept by the Center for State Child Welfare Data and the Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

THE CURRENT STUDY

Thematic analysis

As noted in Part 4, information about why youth (aged 13-17 years inclusive) went missing from OOHC was available in respect of just over a quarter of reports (n=493). The data relating to children was excluded from analysis due to the small sample size and limited jurisdictional input.

Type of placement

Information regarding the type of care placement from which children and young people most commonly went missing was of limited utility. Some jurisdictions did not include this field in the data provided, noting only that the child or young person was in OOHC.

Analysis of the data that was provided indicates that youth in OOHC were most likely to go missing from residential care / group homes. This is consistent with the literature.

Concerns about the OOHC placement

There was no discussion of concerns about the OOHC placement on the files in J1, and in J7 concerns about OOHC were noted in just over three percent of cases. These low rates could reflect the small sample size of the missing youth cohort in these jurisdictions or suggest that young people who went missing did not hold any concerns about their placement. Alternatively, it could indicate a cultural approach to youth going missing from OOHC whereby concerns that a young person may have about their placement were not inquired into if expressed, or simply not reported to police. The literature suggests this lack of concern being cited by youth about their OOHC placements is unusual.

Other jurisdictions reported higher rates of concerns about the OOHC environment. For example, youth in OOHC in J5 and J3 reported concerns with their placements at over six percent and over nine percent respectively. In J4, over 17 percent of youth said they missing because of problems in their OOHC placement and in J6, over 19 percent of the OOHC cohort went missing because of concerns about their placement.

A number of issues arose in relation to new placements in particular, with youth either refusing to go to a new home or going missing shortly after arriving at a new facility. While information was very limited (often just a one-line entry in the data provided) other identified concerns included being threatened or intimidated by other youth in the placement or disliking the carer or residential facility staff.

PART 6: THE PATTERN OF MISSING EPISODES

This section presents a thematic analysis of the pattern of missing episodes identified in the Australian police data. This includes: how youth went missing, the length of missing episodes, the number of missing episodes, and how and where missing youth were located. This analysis is presented alongside a review of the pertinent literature.

CONTEXT

The Victorian Department of Health and Human Services (the 'DHHS) has stated that it is important that missing patterns be identified. It emphasised that:

'police should be asking "Is the child safe? Is there a plan for the child to be supported to remain at placement?" and "Is there a pattern of missing? Can the pattern be described? (Frequency, duration, where is the child going to?)'³⁹⁹

It also stressed that looking for children when they go missing is a key aspect to preventing sexual exploitation and urged police to complete missing person reports and seek warrants for young people when they are missing. Adherence to this directive may explain the large numbers of youth for whom warrants were issued arising out of missing episodes, identified in a recent Victorian study⁴⁰⁰ of young people involved in both the child welfare and criminal justice systems.

How youth went missing

Understand how youth go missing can provide insights into the pattern of missing episodes, such as whether young people in OOHC are overstaying an approved absence, staying out past curfew, or leaving a placement without permission. The language used to describe these missing episodes or missing youth can also provide insight into why youth go missing, indicate how seriously the episode has been regarded by both care staff and police, and the appropriateness and timeliness of agency responses. Identifying patterns may assist to understand the situation or circumstances that a young person may be running away or going missing from, as well as the potential risks that a youth may be exposed to while missing. It can also indicate where a young person might be located, and the likelihood that they will return to the placement of their own accord.

Missing in company

Peer relationships within care placements may be important in determining why young people go missing from OOHC. For example, the South Australian Guardian for Children and Young People has found that youth in OOHC who engage in risky activity and associations often invite or coerce others into joining them.⁴⁰¹ The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse⁴⁰² found both that co-residents sometimes ran away together, and that peers intimidated or influenced others in their placement, including through the use of verbal and physical threats and sexual abuse. The Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory⁴⁰³ also found that young people in residential care often went missing with others in their placement.

Studies have reported staff views regarding the vulnerability of some young people in OOHC, particularly those with cognitive impairment or intellectual disability, to the influence of other young people with whom they may be living: 'One care worker commented: '...you know, they're naïve, and they'll just do whatever their peer tells them to do'.⁴⁰⁴

A recent English study found that young people in care went missing together—'most often when they were living in the same residential care home, but also when they attended the same educational facility or knew each other through previous placements.'⁴⁰⁵

Another English study of repeat missing youth found that in 19 percent of the cases, the youth met up with another missing person.⁴⁰⁶

Multiple missing episodes from one location

High rates of missing episodes from a single location may be a sign of abuse or violence in an OOHC placement. The literature indicates that 'there needs to be awareness that frequent running away by several young people from a single home may indicate abuse or other failings in the management or practice in the home.'⁴⁰⁷ For example, significant variations in absconding rates between different institutions, particularly if these variations cannot be explained by differences in the characteristics of the young people they accommodate, or if youth stop absconding when they move to a different institution⁴⁰⁸ indicate that the OOHC facilities themselves need to be examined. The significance of staff regimes and different institutional practices within OOHC facilities should be inquired into.

A Canadian study⁴⁰⁹ of over 6,500 repeat missing youth found over half of the youths were most commonly reported missing from a small number of 'power few' locations. Drawing on criminological research, the authors noted that a small number of locations and/or individuals produce the most

considerable amount of harm and suggested that rethinking the relationship of missing people to 'risky' places would allow for better targeting of prevention efforts. Rather than focusing solely on the 'individual' as a potential collection of risk factors for going missing, they suggested that targeting the top five locations from which youth commonly went missing could reduce the volume of repeat missing cases by 68.6 percent.

The length of missing episodes

Missing youth are generally located in a few days

The majority of missing persons are found or return of their own accord soon after being reported missing.^{410 411 412} An English study⁴¹³ of a sample of missing persons of all ages found that eight percent remained missing for longer than one week. Most missing youth are located within one to three days.⁴¹⁴ For example, the US NISMART⁴¹⁵ study found that most runaway youth were gone less than one week (77 percent).

In Australia, the Australian Institute of Criminology found that two-thirds of reports received in NSW, VIC, QLD, TAS and the ACT were resolved within 48 hours. Another fifth were resolved within a week.⁴¹⁶

However, a proportion of youth will be missing for longer. For example, seven percent of US runaway youth⁴¹⁷ and 16 percent of UK runaways⁴¹⁸ were missing for more than one month. Over half of a US sample of youth missing from OOHC were missing between one to 12 months⁴¹⁹.

Brief (often daytime) absences

Young people may go missing for much shorter periods of time during the day: a pattern that traditionally was not regarded as being 'missing' or absent from home or placement.

Research^{420 421 422} has identified that brief daytime absences can conceal sexual and criminal exploitation and predatory adults have become adept at ensuring that missing episodes are short enough to escape the scrutiny of police and other agencies.⁴²³

This has led agencies to emphasise that police need to be aware of missing patterns: for example, the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services' Guide⁴²⁴ to disrupting Child Sexual Exploitation proposes that police identify if there have there been 'incidents of missing from care, especially when the child is not going to a place or person known by workers or carers as a safe person' or has 'a new

or escalating pattern of missing from care'. Gathering information to disrupt exploitation may include recording the time of day when the child was not at the placement.

The number of missing episodes

As discussed in Part 3 of this report, while the likelihood of going missing may be quite low, youth who have run away or gone missing once are at an increased risk of going missing again. Young people in OOHC placements are at higher risk of going missing more than once in any given period.⁴²⁵
⁴²⁶ For example, Sidebottom et al, (2019) found that youth missing ten times or more, were over nine times more likely to be in care compared to youth who went missing once.

How youth were located

The literature suggests that there are often problems with the adequacy of information being recorded by care staff and /or on police files. For example, one study found that in some cases information on where the person was found was not recorded in the file at all, while in others the file simply said that the person had been found in a particular geographic region or local area, without specifying why they were there or whom they had been with.⁴²⁷

Care facilities may not be forthcoming with details regarding when and how youth returned to their placements. For example, a recent NSW study reported that police complained that while residential facilities were quick to make a missing person report if a young person was late back to placement, they often failed to inform police when a missing child returned:

'Sometimes they don't even let us know that they're back, so we're chasing our tails in the morning. The next supervisor has to ring up and say, 'Are they still missing?' et cetera. And it's the same people they're reporting missing all the time.'⁴²⁸

Returning on their own

The literature indicates that most young people who go missing will return on their own in a relatively short time. For example, Tarling and Burrows (2003)⁴²⁹ reported that approximately about half of their sample returned to the place from which they had been reported missing. The Vera Institute⁴³⁰ found that almost two-thirds of high-risk repeat missing youth in OOHC returned to their placements of their own volition.

Located by police

If families or care staff are reluctant or not available to collect missing youth, police may be relied upon to return children. In England, some young people have also stayed overnight at the police station, although this should not occur.⁴³¹

OOHC staff reliance on police to resolve missing youth cases can frustrate both agencies. As a recent NSW study reported:

‘Respondents ‘described the relationship between police and residential staff as ‘fractured’ (Police participant F), ‘frustrating’ (Police participant J) and ‘not good’ (Police participant K). Police participant A described getting into shouting matches and being hung up on by care staff. As Police participant J commented: ‘it’s no wonder they’re [the children] frustrated; these kids are frustrated and acting out, it’s because the carers are frustrating. I am frustrated. I am the professional. These kids are no doubt going to be frustrated’.⁴³²

It can also lead to the criminalisation of missing youth, as has been reported in Australia^{433 434} and in England.^{435 436} In some parts of the United States, criminalisation occurs by virtue of the act of going missing or running away: the act itself is regarded as an offence and is responded to with criminal sanctions including detention.^{437 438}

The literature also indicates that a small number of youths are located by police after engaging in criminal activity or having committed a disturbance while missing.^{439 440}

Some youth may contact police themselves while missing. This may be to simply alert police to the fact that they are safe and well, or to discourage police from searching for them. In some cases, young people have contacted police to report a crime having been committed against them.⁴⁴¹

Located by carers

Some youth will phone their place of residence to say that they were safe and well⁴⁴² and in some cases, organise to be collected by carers or police. In England, commercial taxi firms have been used to collect children who had been located after a missing incident. This practice raises concerns in terms of risk to both the children and young people, as well as the taxi driver such as in situations where young people have tried to get out of a moving vehicle.⁴⁴³ Taxi services have also been

'involved in a number of sexual exploitation cases, picking youth up near their homes or from public areas such as streets or parks, and driving them to locations where the abuse will occur. The taxi itself may be the location of the abuse'.⁴⁴⁴

How carers and workers respond to young people when go missing is important. For example, Chapin Hall researchers observed that some youth expected carers to look for them when they were missing. The failure of a worker to do so engendered further detachment from the OOHC system.⁴⁴⁵

Located with 'friends' and family

Many youths are located with friends or family. For example, one study reported that of youth who had failed to return on their own, 17 percent were found either at a friend's or at a relative's address.⁴⁴⁶

Where youth were located

An English study found that 10 percent of missing youth were located in the street or a public place such as a park, railway station or a shopping centre.⁴⁴⁷ A survey conducted by The Railway Children⁴⁴⁸, which asked OOHC staff where young runaways had been located reported that youth had been found (in no specific order):

- at the house of a friend (including boy/girlfriend);
- house of a family member;
- house of an acquaintance or stranger;
- at house parties;
- an outdoor area (park, wasteland, streets);
- shopping centres or arcades or takeaway/fast food place;
- train or bus station;
- previous care placement or other care home (not their own);
- youth project or community centre; and
- hotels or Bed & Breakfasts.

Missing youth may also be located at hospitals or mental health facilities, possibly after sustaining injuries while missing, or because of substance issues or mental health concerns. An English study found that two percent of young people in OOHC had been located at a hospital (although did not specify the reason)⁴⁴⁹ and a recent Welsh study⁴⁵⁰ of almost 600 young people reported missing in a 12-month period found the frequency with which they presented at Accident and Emergency was an

indicator of the challenges young people experience surviving and the high-risks they faced. A recent US publication by the American Academy of Paediatrics⁴⁵¹ also emphasised the importance of professionals being aware of the potential health risks experienced by missing children and young people and advised its members of their role as mandatory reporters if abuse or neglect was suspected.

Distance travelled

Studies from the United States reported that youth generally travelled between 10 and 50 miles from home, although almost a quarter (23 percent) had travelled more than 50 miles.⁴⁵² Nine percent had left the State during a missing episode.⁴⁵³

A study of runaways from Northern Ireland⁴⁵⁴ found that young people generally remained in the local area when missing, although some young people journeyed to other towns or crossed borders. Youth travelled further distances when adults exploited them and facilitated and paid/or for their transport. This finding is consistent with another study which found that youth who go missing for longer periods of time and who travel farther from home are more likely to have been abused previously.⁴⁵⁵

THE CURRENT STUDY

How youth went missing

Analysis was limited by incomplete data: just over 19 percent of files contained reference to how youth in OOHC had gone missing. It is also noted that all of this information was obtained from the one jurisdiction (J1). Accordingly, caution should be taken before generalising the findings to other jurisdictions.

Analysis of the police data for this jurisdiction indicates that most young people who went missing from OOHC seemed to have simply walked out the door of their placement: some young people were reported as having climbed out of a window, or lay hidden until an opportunity arose whereby, they could leave without the carer's knowledge. That a young person would feel the need to 'escape' in this fashion should raise a red flag that all may not be well in the placement.

Some young people set off for school but never arrived: consistent with the literature⁴⁵⁶ a small number of young people were reported missing from their placements but still attended school and were reported as safe and well by their teachers or school counsellors.

Other young people ran away from their carers while on an outing or while at the shops. In J1, young people ran away while out with their carers on 27 occasions in the 30-day data collection period; this equates to a report being received almost once every day.

One potentially very dangerous aspect of this last way of going missing is demonstrated in the number of young people who went missing from OOHC by alighting from their carers' cars: in J1 young people had gotten out of a carer's moving vehicle or while stopped at traffic lights on at least 11 occasions. The risk to a child through being struck by another car while running away in this fashion is obvious.

Missing in company

Data limitations made it difficult to present a national picture on the rates of youth who went missing from OOHC in company. However, information was available from two jurisdictions (J1 and J3). In J1, eight percent of reports indicated that youth had gone missing with other young people. In J3, 22 percent of all missing episodes involved groups of young people.

In the majority of cases, a young person left with another resident from the same facility, or with friends. In a small number of cases, a young person left the placement with their siblings or cousins. They usually went missing in pairs, although groups of three or four young people were also noted.

The literature often presents youth missing in company as the victims of peer group pressure, or manipulation. This was not always the case in the current study, which identified several cases where separated siblings repeatedly went missing in order to be with one another. In at least one case it was evident that an older sibling had acted to protect younger family members from an allegedly abusive placement by going missing and seeking refuge with a relative.

Some information was also available regarding youth missing from OOHC who returned to their placement or were located in the company of other missing youth. For example, in J3, almost nine percent of the youths missing from OOHC returned to their placement in company with another missing youth. Some of these young people had gone missing from OOHC placements in company with other young people, whether siblings or co-residents, and returned with them. Others had left on their placement alone, but subsequently met up with family members living in other residences, or with friends, co-residents or others living in OOHC.

For several sibling groups, this was a regular pattern: youth left separately but had obviously organised to meet up, sometimes going to their parents' homes, or to a previous carers' address, or just meeting up with each other. For these sibling groups, some of whom included children just seven years of age, the missing episode sometimes ended with all family members returning to one of their placements, and subsequently being taken home by staff or collected by their own carers later that night. Some sibling groups recorded in excess of five missing episodes in the month that followed a similar pattern.

There was no information in the notes provided to indicate why families were not placed together, especially given that it appeared that children repeatedly ran away to be with one another, and despite children being reported as missing it was not evident whether staff and carers regarded the familial contact as problematic.

Multiple missing episodes from single locations

It was not possible to determine a national picture of the number of missing episodes that originated from particular locations. However, data provided by one jurisdiction (J3) contained information that allowed individual care-homes to be identified.

Analysis of this data revealed that three OOHC facilities accounted for 17 percent of all missing youth episodes reported during the 30-day collection period. These three facilities accommodated 15 youth, both males and females, ranging from 13 to 17 years of age. A younger child who did not live at any of the facilities also went missing from one, in the company of a sibling who was a resident.



17% OF MISSING REPORTS IN J3
CAME FROM JUST THREE OOHC LOCATIONS

It is not known whether these figures represent all of the youth living at each facility during the month. It is possible that the facilities also housed young people who did not go missing in the period in question. The data provided did not contain information on whether the youth accommodated in these facilities shared particular backgrounds or characteristics that may have increased the risk that they would go missing independent of the specific facilities in which they lived, such as a previous history of going missing from home or care. It is also possible that the facilities were specifically intended for youth who were more likely to go missing than other young people in OOHC. Finally, it is also possible that the disproportionate number of missing episodes from these three facilities reflect a greater propensity on the part of staff/carers to make missing person reports to police than may be the case in other facilities with lower incidents. However, the literature suggests that police attention and investigations should be directed towards the OOHC facilities themselves, as much as to the individuals who went missing from them.

FACILITY
1

FOUR RESIDENTS AND 30 MISSING PERSON REPORTS

FACILITY
2

FOUR RESIDENTS AND 36 MISSING PERSON REPORTS

FACILITY
3

SEVEN RESIDENTS AND 48 MISSING PERSON REPORTS

The length of missing episodes

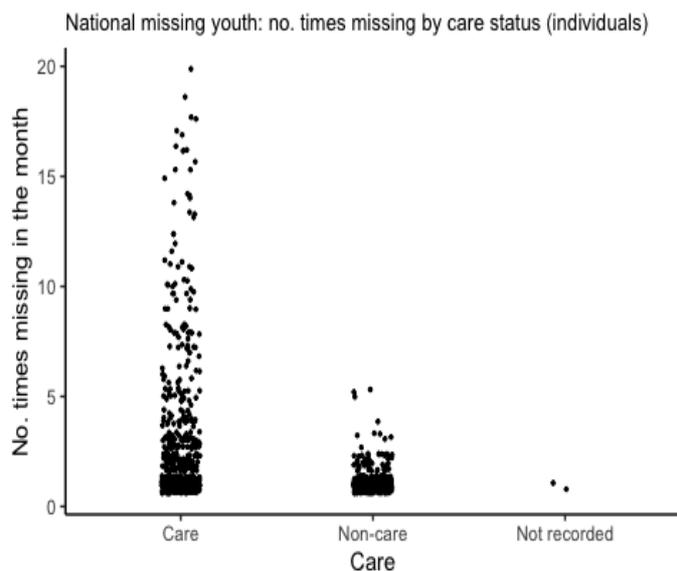
The missing patterns for young people in OOHC and those not in care were similar.

Over 82 percent of young people missing from OOHC, and 71.5 percent of missing non-care youth, were accounted for within three days. Within the month, 98.3 percent of youth missing from OOHC were accounted for, compared to 97.8 percent of non-care youth.

While variations between the two cohorts are observable, these were not considered statistically significant, and indeed are insignificant when compared with the numbers of actual missing youth.

The number of missing episodes

The current study found that nationally, youth in OOHC went missing as many as 20 times in the month. Young people not in care went missing far less: with five times in the 30-day period being the maximum recorded.



Jurisdictional analysis

An association between OOHC status and going missing was evident in most jurisdictions.

Young people in OOHC in J6 went missing 1.49 times on average compared to 1.15 times by young people not in care. In J3, this was 2.64 times compared to 1.23 times on average. In J1, young people in OOHC went missing 4.11 times on average compared to just once on average for young people not in care.



YOUTH IN OOHC WENT MISSING AN AVERAGE OF 1.49 TIMES
YOUTH NOT IN CARE WENT MISSING AN AVERAGE OF 1.15 TIMES



YOUTH IN OOHC WENT MISSING AN AVERAGE OF 2.64 TIMES
YOUTH NOT IN CARE WENT MISSING AN AVERAGE OF 1.23 TIMES



YOUTH IN OOHC WENT MISSING AN AVERAGE OF 4.11 TIMES
YOUTH NOT IN CARE WENT MISSING JUST ONCE IN 30 DAYS

How Youth were located

Over 60 percent of the files contained information about how youth in OOHC were located.

Returned to placement

The majority of missing episodes were resolved when the missing youth returned to their placement. The rates of self-returns ranged from 30 percent (J4) to 56.5 percent (J1).

Returned with other missing youth

As previously indicated, an English study of repeat missing youth found that the youth met up with another missing person in 19 percent of case.⁴⁵⁷ Only one jurisdiction (J3) provided this level of analysis in the current study. This revealed that almost nine percent of the youths missing from OOHC returned to their placement with, or were located in the company of, another missing youth.

Located by law enforcement

The second most common way that a missing youth episode ended was with the involvement of law enforcement officials. Between eight percent (J1) and 35 percent (J4) of missing episodes concluded when the youth was located by police or transport officers.

Some young people contacted police themselves while missing: in J4 approximately seven percent of missing episodes were resolved in this way. It is not known whether these young people disclosed abuse or were the victims of crime, but future research and investigation of this issue should be of interest to both police and child welfare agencies.

Data provided by J3 is illustrative of possible differences in law enforcement responses to missing youth. Given the small sample sizes however, caution in interpreting these figures is advised. Young people reported missing from their family home in J3 were located by law enforcement officials in 36 percent of cases, however youth in OOHC were located by police in 16 percent of cases. Interestingly, seven percent of youth missing from home contacted police for assistance or to advise that they were missing, compared to just 1.3 percent of the OOHC cohort.

Located by carers

Other missing episodes were resolved when the youth was located by carers (ranging from six percent in J4 to 20 percent in both J1 and J3).

In J1 and J4 approximately 10 percent of missing episodes were resolved when missing youth contacted their carers for assistance or to be collected and returned to their placement.

Located by family members/previous carers

Finally, there was some evidence that family members or previous carers also resolved missing episodes, notifying police or carers of a missing youths' whereabouts. For example, five percent of missing episodes in J5 were resolved in this way.

Where youth were located

Most jurisdictions provided limited information regarding where youth were located. The vast majority of youth were recorded as having been located at their care home: this is not surprising given that the majority of missing episodes ended when the young person voluntarily returned to their placement.

Private residences

A number of youths were located in private residences. In J4, just over nine percent of missing episodes were resolved when the young person was found at a private residence. These included the homes of young people's family, previous foster carers, and friends. There was little information on the files to indicate whether the carers knew of and approved of the young person being at the locations.

Police in J3 discovered youth missing from OOHC while executing warrants unrelated to them. Free text fields in the data refer to some of these young people as 'hiding' at the location. Sometimes young people were located at premises with adult males, generally described in the files as 'boyfriends'. It was not able to be determined from the data what action police or the carers took in respect of these relationships, although in many cases a 'Nil Concerns' comment had been entered on the file.

An example of a typical scenario from J3 is detailed as Vignette 1 below.

VIGNETTE 1

A 14-year-old girl went missing from OOHC six times in 30 days
(once for a week)

She had complained to police of being assaulted by a resident at her placement. She had been found with adults on several occasions and twice, was located at an address with her 20-year-old 'boyfriend'.

Filenotes repeatedly referred to her as 'safe and well' and her carers as having 'Nil Concerns'.

Public spaces

Missing young people were frequently located in public spaces such as skate-parks, shopping centres, parks and public transport. In J4 the most common place for youth missing from OOHC to be found was in public spaces (almost 28 percent of episodes). Another nine percent of episodes were resolved when the missing youth was located at a shop or retail outlet or business.

Transport hubs

A number of young people in all jurisdictions were collected by their carers and police at train or bus stations, either because they had previously arranged this pick-up or because young people frequently travel or congregate in these locations and so were easily located.

Interstate travel

While the information available to the project team was very limited, it appeared that some youth had travelled considerable distances interstate or to other towns. Across all jurisdictions a small number of missing youth were located considerable distances from their local area, or interstate.

In J3, children as young as 11 years were collected by care staff at an airport. These young people repeatedly went missing during the 30-day period, and all said they had been with friends: it appeared from the notes provided that the identity of the friends was not known to the carers.

Reference to the airport is concerning for several reasons. Young people in OOHC are not permitted to travel interstate without the permission of the relevant child welfare department.⁴⁵⁸ This is the case even if they are travelling with carers or foster parents. The 16-year-old girl described in Vignette 2 below travelled interstate, which raises questions about how this was achieved.

VIGNETTE 2

A 16-year-old girl repeatedly went missing from OOHC.
On one occasion she was missing
for five days.
She called her carers to pick her up
from the airport after travelling interstate
to 'visit some people'.

International literature suggests that travelling to another town or inter-state should also be considered as a red flag for child criminal or sexual exploitation. While it is possible that young people were travelling to visit family, the considerable distances involved suggest that young people are exposed to risks while travelling, especially if they hitch-hike to get between towns.

The pattern of repeatedly going missing for relatively short periods, returning on their own from, or being collected by carers or police from public transport hubs, such as airports, also has similarities to the pattern of County Line criminal exploitation identified in the English literature.⁴⁵⁹

PART 7: EXPERIENCES WHILE MISSING

This section report discusses the risks of going missing and young people’s experiences while missing. It explores the tension between the recognition of childhood and adolescence as periods of vulnerability, particularly for young people in OOHC, and the view that there is a relatively low risk that a missing child will experience significant harm. Emerging evidence that suggests being missing is a state which greatly increase a child’s risk of criminal or secondary victimization is presented alongside the analysis of Australian police data on youth’s experiences while missing.

CONTEXT

There is little Australia literature regarding the experiences young people have while missing, and little that explores the risks to which they may be exposed while they are missing.

According to the Victorian Department of Health & Human Services (‘the DHHS’), missing young people face an increased risk of poor education outcomes, participation in offending behaviour, mental health concerns (including substance misuse) victimisation and exploitation. The DHHS suggested that the risk of harm faced by a young person can be attributed in part to ‘their level of maturity, the availability of safe accommodation and the youth’s companions [with] safety issues...presumed to reduce for those who stay with friends or relatives compared with those who sleep rough or stay on the street’.⁴⁶⁰

The Australian Institute of Criminology found that while children and young people had a much higher risk of harm while missing than adults, and were more likely to be perpetrators of harm, ‘the risk of perpetrating or experiencing harm while missing, irrespective of the demographic examined, was low’.⁴⁶¹

The AIC analysis of police data did not include information on the specific experiences of youth in OOHC who were reported missing. It observed however, that police had noted substantial challenges faced by agencies both in managing the large numbers of young people reported missing from OOHC, especially ‘the habitual or recidivist missing’, and in protecting young people in care from exposure to physical and sexual abuse. It also noted literature that found that ‘missing young people are...at heightened risk of violent victimisation’ ... [which] suggests that many [young people in care] are exposed to harm and/or engage in risky or criminal behaviour.’⁴⁶²

SECONDARY VICTIMISATION

The international literature indicates that the picture is rather more complex than presented in the Australian DHHS and the AIC reports.

In the United States, Plass explored the additional risks associated with a child going missing, such as secondary victimisation from sexual assault, physical assault and accidental injury. This was done both to identify the extent to which the experience of being missing increases a young person's risk for re-victimisation, and the extent to which experiencing a secondary victimisation affects the overall impact of being a missing youth.

While a 'paucity of data sources'⁴⁶³ meant that data about secondary victimisation was difficult to obtain, Plass drew on extensive data contained in the FBI's Uniform Crime Reporting system (UCR), the National Crime Victimization Survey, the National Incident Based Reporting System (NIBRS) and the National Incidence Study of Missing, Abducted, Runaway and Thrownaway Children (NISMART) studies. She concluded that the occurrence of a secondary victimization greatly increases the risk of physical or emotional harm in a missing child event. She also identified a 'fairly strong body of evidence' which suggests that being missing is a state which greatly increase a child's risk of criminal victimization. Finally, she concluded that young people who are involved in serious runaway events—especially those who are homeless—are very likely to experience secondary victimizations while they are away from home.

NISMART researchers examined data from the NISMART-2, the National Household Survey of Adult Caretakers, the National Household Survey of Youth, and the Juvenile Facilities Study, to provide an estimation of the likely harm that young runaway/throwaway youth experience while missing. They determined that 71 percent of children could have been endangered while missing. Factors such as substance dependency or the use of hard drugs, experience of sexual or physical abuse, presence in a place where criminal activity was occurring, or extreme youth (13 years old or younger) were regarded as risk factors.⁴⁶⁴

The NISMART-2 researchers estimated the risk of harm experienced by young people as follows:

- 21 percent experienced physical or sexual abuse at home in the year prior to the missing episode OR were afraid of abuse on return;
- 19 percent were substance-dependent;
- 18 percent were aged 13 years or younger;

- 18 percent were in the company of someone known to be abusing drugs;
- 17 percent were users of hard drugs;
- 12 percent spent time in a place where criminal activity was known to occur;
- 11 percent engaged in criminal activity while missing;
- Seven percent spent time with a violent person while missing;
- Four percent had previously attempted suicide;
- Four percent had missed at least 5 days of school (if enrolled in school);
- Four percent had been physically assaulted or an attempt had been made to assault them while they were missing;
- Two percent spent time with a sexually exploitative person while missing;
- One percent had a serious mental illness or developmental disability at time of going missing;
- One percent were sexually assaulted or this was attempted while they were missing;
- Less than one percent had their whereabouts unknown to the carer for at least 30 days;
- Less than one percent had engaged in sexual activity in exchange for money, drugs, food or shelter while missing;
- Less than one percent had or developed a serious or life-threatening medical condition while missing.

Youth missing from OOHC

While the NISMART-2 refers to all young runaways, studies investigating the risk of harm faced by youth who run away from OOHC have reported that these young people are at an increased risk of negative consequences, such as criminal victimization, sexual exploitation, and substance or alcohol use.⁴⁶⁵ The Chapin Hall⁴⁶⁶ interviews with 42 youth who had run away from OOHC, found that they had been exposed to a range of risky experiences while missing:

- 55 percent had consumed alcohol;
- 52 percent had used or sold drugs;
- 17 percent had been sexually assaulted or raped;
- 14 percent had physically hurt someone;
- 12 percent had been physically hurt, slept in unsafe places, and damaged property;
- Seven percent had stolen or robbed; and

- Five percent had performed sexual acts for money and asked money from strangers.

A lifetime histories study of a seven-year birth cohort of young people in OOHC in Florida⁴⁶⁷ found that 19 percent had gone missing at least once during their time in care. Of those who had gone missing, seven percent had been victims of human trafficking (for either labour or sexual purposes) while they were missing. The researchers found that young people missing from foster care were more likely to be victimised while missing compared to youth who went missing from other placement types.

Studies from England and Wales have also identified the dangers that young people who run away or go missing may experience.^{468 469 470} Biehal et.al,⁴⁷¹ estimated that one in every eight young people reported missing are physically hurt while away, and one in nine have been sexually assaulted. The Railway Children⁴⁷² charity interviewed youth who had stayed away for a month or more and identified that all of the respondents had consumed drugs and alcohol, a majority had experienced violence on the streets, and many had resorted to stealing, begging or selling sex. The Third National Survey of young runaways⁴⁷³ found that one in nine youth who went missing overnight had been hurt or harmed while away from home and that one in six had slept rough or stayed with someone they just met.

Research conducted with Scottish runaways found that 43 percent had come to harm while missing.⁴⁷⁴

Gender differences

Gender differences have been reported in the literature on the risks faced by young people who go missing, although the findings are varied. For example, Biehal, Mitchell and Wade(2003)⁴⁷⁵ observed that young girls were particularly likely to report feeling unsafe or frightened, and had experienced ‘very dangerous situations’ including actual and attempted rape while missing. However, the UK nationwide survey of runaways⁴⁷⁶, which was published just two years later, identified males as being significantly more likely to have been physically hurt or to have been sexually assaulted.

LGBTQI runaway youth

While there are no specific data that are focused on LGBTQI runaway youth,⁴⁷⁷ homelessness literature suggests that LGBTQI youth are particularly vulnerable to secondary victimisation while

missing. For example, Whitbeck et al (2004)⁴⁷⁸ found that homeless LGBTQI youth reported higher rates of:

- survival sex (16 percent) compared to heterosexual runaway youth (ten percent);
- victimization compared with non-LGBTQ homeless youth, with half of the LGBT teens reporting a sexual victimization since leaving home; and
- substance use.

A 2002 study⁴⁷⁹ that compared LGBTQI homeless youth and heterosexual homeless youth, found that LGBTQI youth reported, on average, over seven more acts of sexual victimization than their heterosexual peers.

There is a significant overlap between these populations: it is estimated that 20 to 40 percent of teenaged homeless youth identify as LGBTQI, compared with four to ten percent of non-homeless youth. Reasons for homelessness amongst the LGBTQI population include parental or carer's rejection. Over 40 percent of respondents said they had been forced out of home by their parents because of sexual orientation or gender identity, and almost one-third had been subject to physical, sexual, or verbal abuse at home.⁴⁸⁰

The pattern and circumstances of the missing episode

The pattern and circumstances of the missing episode is also important when assessing the risk of secondary victimisation. Research indicates that more serious runaway events, such as those in which young people are missing for a long time,⁴⁸¹ travel a long way, and/or become homeless, increase the likelihood of secondary victimisation.⁴⁸²

Emerging research has found that the risk of sexual exploitation exists irrespective of the period of time the youth is missing from home or a care placement.⁴⁸³

Sexual exploitation has also been identified as influencing the pattern of missing episodes, with young people likely to go missing for short periods of time on a regular basis, and to be returned to a placement by predators before their curfew to avoid carers and police attention.⁴⁸⁴

Missing in company of strangers

The research suggests that a child who is 'missing in the company of strangers should be considered to have a higher level of risk for secondary victimization than would a child who is in the company of known companions'.⁴⁸⁵ However, some caution should be exercised in this respect when considering the circumstances of young people in OOHC. Research indicates that youth missing from care are

most likely to seek help while missing from friends, followed by their family.⁴⁸⁶ While this may provide safety and sanctuary, family and friends may present further risk to a youth missing from care: either because they are abusive, have chaotic lifestyles, or are too vulnerable themselves to offer support.⁴⁸⁷ ⁴⁸⁸ Not only has the quality of friendships been shown to be poorer⁴⁸⁹ for those in OOHC, but exploitative relationships, especially with predatory adults, are common.

While the academic literature is relatively silent on the risk that ‘friends’ - particularly those strangers or acquaintances that youth have just met while missing - may present to missing youth, the grey literature, and in particular that produced by monitoring or regulatory bodies, indicates that considerable risk may be encountered behind closed doors by ‘boyfriends’ and other predatory adults. Changing attitudes to what was previously regarded as young people’s choice to engage in prostitution or ‘survival sex’, and emerging international evidence of the prevalence of sexual exploitation and criminal child exploitation of missing youth, suggests that a re-evaluation of the dangers experienced by youth is over-due.

The views of young people in OOHC

The views of those in OOHC provide an interesting insight into the risks faced when young people go missing. The literature suggests that young people are quite aware of the potential risks they face when they go missing from care. For example, participants in a large survey and series of focus groups hosted by the Children’s Rights Director for England stated that running away presented very serious dangers to their safety, including ‘getting kidnapped, killed, raped, hurt’. They referred to ‘dangerous people’; ‘nasty people – men in particular’; ‘perverts and idiots’; ‘paedophiles and prostitutes’⁴⁹⁰ and explained that they sought to avoid such dangers by staying in groups, keeping away from places with lots of people, carrying weapons to protect themselves, and trying to stay awake all night. Being coerced into prostitution, becoming homeless if they stayed away long enough, and knowing children who had gone missing and never returned, ‘made such dangers extremely real for them.’⁴⁹¹

While participants in a later study conducted by the Children’s Rights Director seemed more concerned about the practicalities of how to cope on their own, they also regarded the risks and dangers likely to be encountered while missing as endless. Questioned on what might happen to them while they were away from their placement, young people recited a litany of potential dangers, including:

‘getting raped, being sexually exploited, being stabbed, being kidnapped, being taken and trafficked for sex, being murdered, getting robbed, getting involved in drugs, or being

made pregnant. There were also the dangers of being injured in an accident, such as falling or getting run over on the road, possibly while drunk. Hunger was always a danger, along with getting hopelessly lost...[losing] contact with members of your own family...joining a gang or being forced to join a gang [and]...commit[ting] crimes to survive, even just to get somewhere to sleep; they 'might steal to survive and get arrested'.⁴⁹²

While young people said they had been aware of the dangers of running away before they went missing, it seems that the attraction of what they are running to, or the fear of what they are running from, are foremost in their minds. As one respondent commented, the potential dangers or risks they might encounter while missing 'aren't at the top of your mind when you first run'.⁴⁹³

RISKS ENCOUNTERED WHILE MISSING

Sexual Exploitation

In Australia, the Victorian Government's Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Guide ('the Guide') defines child sexual exploitation as:

'children being forced or manipulated into sexual activity for something – money, gifts, drugs, alcohol or something less tangible such as affection, status or love.'⁴⁹⁴

Noting that the incidence of sexual abuse is much higher than the percentage reports indicate and that children known to child protection are at more at risk of exploitation than children in the general community, the Guide stresses that exploitation 'is a form of sexual abuse and it is not the child's fault'.⁴⁹⁵ It identifies the consequences of sexual exploitation as being more significant than those arising from other forms of sexual abuse, with victims of exploitation reporting more mental health issues, trauma symptoms, going missing, functional impairments and engagement in risky behaviours.

Exchanging sex for food or shelter has long been noted in the academic literature on runaways and missing or homeless youth, although it is only relatively recently that it was regarded as sexual exploitation rather than opportunistic survival sex, or prostitution. For example, studies have found that:

- 20 percent of runaways had been involved in sex for sale experiences while they were on the streets;⁴⁹⁶
- 30 percent of children who were 'on the streets' had been sexually assaulted;⁴⁹⁷

- 37 percent of girls and ten percent of boys in a sample of 240 runaway and homeless adolescents had been sexually victimised while on the streets.⁴⁹⁸

There are strong links between going missing and sexual exploitation.⁴⁹⁹ Exploitation has been found to be both a risk factor *for* going missing and a risk *of* going missing. There is no single model of sexual exploitation or coercion, and 'it is unknown whether the nature of the link...is causal and/or linear'.⁵⁰⁰

Youth in OOHC

Much of the research into sexual exploitation in the United States has concentrated on the risks posed to young people missing from home. Relatively little is known about the prevalence or risk for young people missing from OOHC: recently however, the National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (the 'NMEC') warned that of the victims of child sex trafficking, 74 percent were in the care of social services or foster care when they went missing.⁵⁰¹

Children and young people involved in the child protection and OOHC systems have been recognised as a particularly high-risk group for sexual exploitation. For example, the DHHS Guide⁵⁰² specifically lists 'Missing from care' as a factor that increases the likelihood of being exposed to sexual exploitation.

The same factors which may lead to children going missing may be those that expose them to the risk of sexual exploitation.

These include:

- Being rejected and unwanted may act as 'push factors' leading youth to run from a placement, while 'pulling' them to people offering promises of love and affection;
- The person to whom the youth runs may involve them in sexual exploitation or, not ensure they are protected from it. These people may also be committing other crimes such as drug trafficking and harbouring children who have gone missing⁵⁰³;
- Lack of supervision and spending time on the streets increases a child's exposure to danger, including to abusive or manipulative adults, exposure to drugs and to other children who are being sexually exploited;
- The need for money to meet daily needs increases vulnerability to exploitation;
- Being detached from significant relationships and positive social relationships;
- Experiencing difficulties with the placement environment;

- A lack of routine;
- Lack of engagement with education; and
- Chronic exposure to family violence.

Based on its experience working with young people affected by exploitation in the UK, Barnardo's (2016)⁵⁰⁴ identified a number of 'key indicators' of vulnerability to sexual exploitation. These include:

- Going missing for periods of time or regularly returning home late;
- Regularly missing school or not taking part in education;
- Appearing with unexplained gifts or new possessions;
- Associating with other young people involved in exploitation;
- Having older boyfriends or girlfriends;
- Suffering from sexually transmitted infections;
- Mood swings or changes in emotional wellbeing;
- Drug and alcohol misuse; and
- Displaying inappropriate sexualised behaviour.

The UK Office of the Children's Commissioner's interim report into child sexual exploitation in groups and gangs⁵⁰⁵ highlighted the vulnerability of missing youth and challenged the stereotype that young runaways are at risk only while 'on the streets'. Youth have been abused behind closed doors in a variety of locations, including 'parties, vehicles, streets and alleys, schools, private houses, parks, shopping centres, and bus, train or tube stations',⁵⁰⁶ and in taxis and Ubers hired by carers to bring children back to care placements.⁵⁰⁷

Unaccompanied asylum-seekers in OOHC

In England, unaccompanied asylum-seeking youth placed in OOHC have been identified as being at particular risk of going missing. Placement in OOHC has been found to be a specific source of further abuse, with children's homes being targeted by perpetrators of child sexual exploitation. In the UK, perpetrators of child sexual exploitation have groomed and abused multiple children in various care facilities across extended periods of time.⁵⁰⁸

Studies have revealed that young people commonly go missing from care within the first week of their placement. Many disappear without trace⁵⁰⁹: approximately two-thirds of trafficked children in the UK are never found. In this respect, the care system operates as a 'holding pen' where organised

traffickers keep children until they are ready to collect them. Other young people may go missing to avoid the traffickers from whom they have been rescued, or because they are afraid of the consequences if they give information that might implicate the traffickers.

Reports and commentary published by the United Nations' Special Rapporteur's on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography⁵¹⁰; the Independent Expert for the UN Secretary-General on Violence Against Children⁵¹¹; and the Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA)⁵¹² as well as reports produced by global alliances and campaigns such as Missing People Europe and ECPAT (End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography and the Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes), have all identified the harms inflicted on youth in OOHC through the involvement of criminal organisations.

OOHC placements in Australia

Perpetrators of child sexual abuse also target young people in OOHC when they go missing. This is demonstrated in the findings of three inquiries conducted in the late 1980s and 1990s. For example, in 1986 the NSW Parliament's Rogan Inquiry into Prostitution found that the greatest risk factor for a career in prostitution was 'being in the care of the state'. The Committee observed that:

'A high proportion of young recruits [to prostitution] in the inner city appear to be ex or absconding State wards and many of these are graduates from institutional care...the vast majority of runaways do not gravitate to Kings Cross and Darlinghurst, but young people absconding from institutions are much more likely to do so....Institutional care has been a crucial staging post on the road to recruitment'.⁵¹³

Three years later the national Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission *Our Homeless Children* Inquiry (the 'Burdekin Inquiry') reported that most young homeless people in Sydney tended to congregate around Kings Cross, and that the majority of young male prostitutes in the area were current State wards. Declaring this to be 'a grave indictment of the dereliction by responsible State authorities', the Inquiry found that some youth were forced into prostitution to obtain an income. It observed that young wards were all aware that rich adults were exploiting them because they were poor and homeless. Most of them decided in the end that it was better for them to be poor or to get money in other illegal ways. The Burdekin Inquiry also noted that due to 'the exigencies of finding shelter when living on the streets or sleeping out, many young people will take up with strangers if they are offered accommodation. This, of course, has many dangers...'⁵¹⁴

The Burdekin Inquiry concluded that:

‘In all major cities there appears to be a highly profitable industry which relies, at least in part, on a constant supply of homeless young people. Both males and females become involved in prostitution. Their motivation for this is clear... all of the young people who had engaged in prostitution came to it as a choice between it or continued homelessness’.⁵¹⁵

In 1997 the Wood Royal Commission into the New South Wales Police Service took evidence from paedophiles that they targeted ‘runaways, State wards and other disenfranchised children’⁵¹⁶ including at ‘the known haunts for under-age prostitutes such as the Wall in Darlinghurst, [and] the park near Central Railway Station... Runaways, the homeless, and drug users are the primary targets of these offenders.’⁵¹⁷

What is clear from these three inquiries is that children in OOHC knew where to go when they absconded; unlike other missing children, youth in care went to the known red-light district of Kings Cross.

A similar pattern of sexual exploitation was identified in South Australia. In 2004 the South Australian Mullighan Children in State Care Commission of Inquiry (‘the CISC’) began investigating the sexual abuse and deaths of children in State care.⁵¹⁸ The CISC found that paedophiles in Adelaide targeted and exploited children in State care when they absconded from their placements. Former children in State care told the Inquiry about the ‘very close-knit community’ at known haunts around Adelaide and that it was ‘very easy to make money’ at parties attended by men at private houses that involved sex, drugs and alcohol. A former staff member of a residential care unit told the Inquiry that young people ‘...would disappear for two or three days at a time. They would come back looking like a lost, bedraggled dog, dirty, filthy, hungry ... sometimes with cigarettes, sometimes with new shoes.’

The CISC reported that ‘the State Government has been aware of paedophile networks targeting youth from State care since the 1980s.’⁵¹⁹ Damningly, it warned that ‘[t]he problem still exists. In July 2007, the department identified 16 children living in residential units as frequent absconders, who are considered to be at high risk from sexual exploitation.

Limitations of the Australian academic literature

Examination of these issues in the Australian academic literature, however, has been limited. Publications from the early 1990s on prostitution⁵²⁰, the late 1990s on the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children^{521 522}, and more recently, in publications on Forced Marriage⁵²³ and Organised Gangs^{524 525} have revealed a pronounced lack of attention paid to the overlap between these issues and the circumstances and experiences of missing youth in general, and youth in OOHC in particular.

For example, these studies have primarily discussed the criminal and sexual exploitation of children as an international phenomenon, and although the authors acknowledge the internationally accepted definition of 'trafficking' as occurring across local domestic boundaries as well as across State borders, they have failed to consider this in the Australian context.

This indicates a significant research gap in the academic literature, particularly given the findings of the 2015 Queensland Organised Crime Commission of Inquiry⁵²⁶ which found that child sex trafficking is increasing in Australia. In 2017, the AIC noted high profile cases in the UK and Australian state police investigations have identified:

'grooming networks where young people (mostly female and predominantly from out-of-home care) are subject to sexual exploitation during repeated missing events...young people [are] contacted through social media, provided with cigarettes, money, drugs and alcohol in exchange for sex... [they] are unlikely to perceive or report the behaviour as sexual assault.'⁵²⁷

Homelessness

There are some similar risk factors and experiences that characterise homelessness and/or being missing.⁵²⁸

Sleeping rough - that is, on the streets - has been associated with heightened risk for missing youth. The UK Social Exclusion Unit (2002)⁵²⁹ found young people missing from care were over-represented among those sleeping on the streets of London and cities across the UK. 'Rough sleepers' were more than twice as likely to be victims of crime than the general population⁵³⁰. Dangers included being sexually or physically assaulted, being or feeling threatened by others, and being approached by strangers during the night. A study conducted 15 years later found over two thirds of young male runaway respondents had slept rough at some point and although 'it was less common for young

women to sleep rough...some did so when other options had run out.'⁵³¹ Many young people reported they felt depressed and overwhelmed and reduced to doing things they would not normally have done, including committing crime and problematic drug and alcohol use.

The 1989 Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission *Our Homeless Children* (the 'Burdekin Inquiry') is the Australian benchmark with regard to identifying the pathways into and risks associated homelessness. It identified that young people in OOHC, both those who had aged out of care and those who had run away or absconded from their placement, constituted a significant proportion of all homeless youth. Young people are vulnerable to physical attacks both while sleeping rough, and at the hands of supposed benefactors or friends. Fear of violence is also inextricably bound up with sexual and criminal exploitation. The Inquiry observed:

'To some extent being subject to violence was seen as inevitable, and if it was inevitable it could not be the subject of complaint....such experiences which lead young people to believe that it may be alright for someone to bash them, inevitably lead to the belief that it is alright to attack someone else.'⁵³²

Sarri et.al.,(2016)⁵³³ have suggested that youth may have higher rates of homelessness into adulthood, due to their socialisation (such as a history of abuse) and exposure to street life (when they go missing).

Physical health and injury

The National Missing Person Coordination Centre has stated that '...there are vulnerabilities present when someone disappears. Lack of access to support, financial constraints, poor hygiene, substance abuse etc. may all impact on a young person's ability to keep safe.'⁵³⁴

The literature indicates that missing young people face health risks such as sexually transmitted diseases, HIV infection and physical illnesses arising from poor hygiene, poor nutrition and exposure to the elements.⁵³⁵ A study of young runaways in Northern Ireland reported that some young people were noticeably undernourished, tired, and unkempt when they returned to care.⁵³⁶ In England, inquiries have heard that sexually exploited youth have been abducted and held without access to food, water or the ability to wash.⁵³⁷ A 2019 Welsh study⁵³⁸ of almost 600 young people reported missing to Gwent police in a 12 month period, found that 28 percent went missing from care

placements, and that the cohort's frequent attendances at Accident and Emergency indicated the challenges young people experience surviving and the high-risk context of their safety.

The importance of professionals being aware of the potential health risks to runaway or missing children and young people was recently examined in a paper published by the *American Academy of Pediatrics*. The report drew attention to the risks of poor sexual health for young runaways, including pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections and sexual exploitation and abuse. Noting that paediatricians are mandated reporters, the authors advised that a formal report of exploitation must be made to both law enforcement and to child protective services if abuse is suspected.⁵³⁹

The risk of pregnancy and the dangers associated with parenting while homeless have been explored by Thompson et al⁵⁴⁰ who noted that there are high rates of pregnancy among runaway and homeless youth. This is attributed to:

- The interruption of normal adolescent development by residential instability;
- A disruption in education;
- A lack of adult caretakers;
- A disconnection from traditional supports such as school, family and society;
- Elevated rates of engagement in risky sexual behaviours, including unprotected sex;
- High levels of substance use and abuse;
- Street victimisation;
- Mental health issues;
- Pro-Social Disengagement; and
- Pregnancy Motivation – whether to access support services otherwise seen as unobtainable, or out of the desire to have a child that will provide 'unconditional love'.

Difficulties in pregnancy due to poor nutritional intake, prenatal exposure to substances, increased likelihood of children being born preterm, having a low birth weight, and experiencing neurological and physical problems due to prenatal nutritional deficits are risks associated with pregnancy while homeless. The pressure to relinquish a child to family members or have the child removed into the OOHC care system is also a risk that young homeless and runaway youth experience.

Mental health

The research on mental health, self-harm incidents and suicide attempts of missing youth is limited.

Over three quarters of Australian homeless youth reported episodes of serious depression, slightly less than one third have made direct attempts at suicide, and many others reported episodes of non-suicidal self-harm.⁵⁴¹

In the US, nearly a quarter of runaway youth who sought assistance from a child advocacy centre had a history of a suicide attempt, compared with approximately 14 percent of youth who had not run away.⁵⁴² The NISMART-2 revealed that four percent of endangered youth in the US had attempted suicide previously⁵⁴³ and poor mental health has been associated with street victimization among homeless and runaway youth.⁵⁴⁴

English research has noted that carers were concerned about youth who self-harmed upon their return, believing this to be a reaction to distressing experiences such as possible sexual assaults, and/or unprotected sex during missing episodes.⁵⁴⁵

Substance use

Drug abuse has been found to be 'a very common manifestation' among homeless youth, and '...the process of self-medication may to some extent be behaviour learnt from the 'law-abiding' adult world. It does, however, carry with it some very serious consequences'.⁵⁴⁶

Researchers have found that alcohol and other substance-related disorders are associated with increased risk of running away^{547 548 549} although a causal link has not been established.⁵⁵⁰ It is not known whether the use of drugs and/or alcohol precipitates running away, or whether being asked or forced to leave home or a care placement lead to increased substance use. Studies have also indicated that:

- Nearly a third of runaway youth who sought assistance from a US child advocacy centre met the criteria for problem substance use, compared with approximately ten percent of youth who had not run away;⁵⁵¹
- The NISMART-2 revealed that 17 percent of runaway youth reported using hard drugs; 18 percent were in the company of someone known to be using drugs while away, and 19 percent of youth surveyed were substance dependent;⁵⁵² and

- UK researchers Biehal & Wade (2000)⁵⁵³ found that going missing from care was associated with drug misuse.

An overlap between missing episodes, sexual victimisation and substance use has been observed by De Hart (2009)⁵⁵⁴ who found that young women who go missing often stay with adult males who facilitate their substance use.

Sarri et.al (2016)⁵⁵⁵ suggested that missing youth may have higher rates of substance misuse into adulthood, attributing this to both a consequence of socialisation (such as a history of abuse) and exposure to street life (when they go missing).

Disengagement from education

Disengagement from school is thought to be a significant risk factor for a young person running away, going missing or becoming homeless. For example:

- A US analysis of over 15 000 youth in crisis shelters or transitional living programs indicated that 47 percent had irregular school attendance and 22 percent had dropped out or been expelled;⁵⁵⁶
- A US study that examined the impact of entering OOHC on school attendance found that youths with a history of going missing entered care with worse attendance records than their fellow foster youths, and attended school less after placement in care;⁵⁵⁷
- Chapin Hall⁵⁵⁸ researchers found that running away prevented school attendance, rather than school preventing running episodes: however, they noted that some missing youth attempted to maintain their links with education, prizing it as important or special, even as they were determined to remain on the run, in order to avoid the danger or difficulty posed to them by their home or care placement.

UK researchers Biehal et al⁵⁵⁹ found that going missing from care was associated with exclusion from school. The research team⁵⁶⁰ identified a number of factors that contributed to young people detaching from education after entering OOHC. These factors included:

- fear of bullying
- difficulty managing group relationships
- feeling that they did not fit in
- mental health concerns

- difficulty concentrating due to distress from separation
- conflict with teachers
- a culture of non-attendance at their residential unit
- peer pressure to not attend, and
- the impact of the unit lifestyle (staying up late, no one else working on homework, realisation staff cannot force attendance).

In Australia, the education system's use of suspension and expulsions impact disproportionately upon young people in OOHC.⁵⁶¹ This confirmed the findings of a 2015 study of young people appearing before the NSW Children's Court on criminal charges.⁵⁶² According to data obtained by the Australian Human Rights Commission, almost 60 percent of children and young people in OOHC were suspended in 2016, and these children lost, on average, 29 school days to suspensions.⁵⁶³

Involvement in the criminal justice system

Twenty years ago the Australian Institute of Criminology reported that despite the lack of specific Australian data on young people's involvement in the criminal justice system, 'it is another issue to consider within the missing person dimension'. It noted that 'children who choose to go missing, may find themselves in circumstances where they are homeless and without funds or in peer groups where they are pressured to participate in illegal activities...[and] can drift into homelessness and criminality.'⁵⁶⁴

The authors did not refer to the many Australian inquiries that had examined this issue, such as the 1989 Burdekin Inquiry, which a decade earlier had observed that young homeless people, many of whom were children missing from OOHC:

'survive on the margins of society through begging and like behaviour, through others exploiting their financial predicament (prostitution) and through illegal activities [ranging from] avoiding fares on public transport to robbery with violence in order to survive or supplement their income...begging and petty offending was typical...stealing and break and enter offences were extremely common...robbery with some degree of violence was not a rare way for the homeless young to obtain money, especially in Sydney' [and] dealing drugs [which] normally involved selling marijuana to friends and acquaintances, and was not very financially rewarding.'⁵⁶⁵

The commission of so-called ‘survival offences’ – crimes such as shoplifting, burglary or robbery - has been regarded as ‘almost inevitable’ if homeless young people are ‘to secure the basic needs of food, shelter [and] clothing.’⁵⁶⁶ The substantial body of literature from a number of jurisdictions indicates that participation in survival crimes is common amongst homeless populations, including young people who have gone missing from OOHC.^{567 568 569 570 571}

It does not take very long before young runaways turn to crime in order to survive: one study claimed that after a month, one in two runaway children resort to stealing, drug dealing, prostitution or other crime to support themselves.⁵⁷² Another study found that children who went missing for a week or more, were more than twice as likely to engage in survival crime, such as stealing or begging, than youth who were away for just one night.⁵⁷³ It also suggested that children were more likely to steal or beg if they slept rough on the streets than if they stayed with a friend or relative - suggesting again that a lot of low-level street crime is essentially about survival.

A number of studies have found that going missing from care is associated with offending behaviour. These are briefly summarised below.

- Abrahams and Mungal (1992)⁵⁷⁴ found that 46 percent of those going missing from children’s homes had previous criminal convictions. This compared to just seven percent of those who went missing from home;
- Sinclair and Gibbs (1998)⁵⁷⁵ found that young people with convictions were more likely to go missing than those without. Young people who went missing were also more likely to be convicted while living in a children’s home;
- Wade et al (1998)⁵⁷⁶ found that offending could pre-date admission to care, and reported that some young people went missing in order to continue offending. They also identified different patterns of criminal involvement: some offending occurred during group escapes from children’s homes, and some was ‘survival’ crimes committed in order to survive outside of the OOHC system;
- Biehal & Wade (2000)⁵⁷⁷ found that 68 percent of children who went missing from residential care and 27 percent who went missing from foster care offended during their time away from their placement;
- Hayden (2010)⁵⁷⁸ identified that police call-outs to children’s residential care are predominantly about children going missing, and that children who go missing are more likely to commit a crime. Being reported missing to the police and the

consequent contact and surveillance this brings was part of the 'criminogenic' environment in children's residential care;

A particularly useful study of the criminal involvement of young people who have gone missing is that by Shalev-Greene (2011).⁵⁷⁹ She examined the criminal offending of 51 young people who had gone missing three or more times over one year. While the number of children were similar, those in OOHC went missing more often than did young people who went missing from their own home. Over 85 percent of the so-called 'recidivist missing' had been arrested at least once, and over a quarter of the sample had been arrested ten or more times. Those missing repeatedly were seven times more likely to commit crime than those who did not go missing.

Shalev-Greene found that in as many as 40 percent of cases, young people's criminal careers began when they were reported missing. The most common offence that young people were convicted for was battery, assault and GBH (31 percent) with shoplifting and theft (16 percent) and criminal damage (14 percent). The study did not, unlike previous research, find high rates of drug use, at least in terms of young people being arrested for drug possession. The finding that the most common crimes involved aggression, was seen as telling of the lifestyle that young people face while missing, as well as possibly indicating an emotional state in which heightened levels of aggression are demonstrated against both people and property in the form of criminal damage. The relatively high rates of shoplifting and theft were seen as indicative of the fact that the youth may not have had alternative means of support, and may have been 'survival' crimes.

A 2016 study by Sarri et al.⁵⁸⁰ also considers some interesting aspects of young people's involvement in the criminal justice system. Sarri examined the administrative records relating to 371 young people in OOHC in Michigan and found that running away from care had the largest effect on the subsequent criminal justice involvement of young people in OOHC. Over 40 percent of young people who went missing from care experience subsequent contact with the youth justice system, compared with young people who did not go missing.

The study also identified a race and gender aspect to young people's involvement in the criminal justice system. Males of colour most commonly lived in residential care, however this type of care was predominantly situated in white-dominated, rural areas. Issues of heightened visibility to law enforcement, increased surveillance and institutional racism were alluded to by the authors, who observed that the young men 'were vulnerable for easy 'pick-up' by police'.⁵⁸¹

Males were also more likely than females to have involvement in the justice system when they went missing. The reasons for this disparity were complex and inter-related: females were more likely to be

arrested for minor matters or for status offences, such as running away, and also tended to be younger than their male peers. Males 'drift' to the justice system was seemingly more tolerated by child welfare staff: girls tended to be placed in low-security group homes or with relatives, whereas males who ran away were more likely to be placed in secure detention rather than returned to welfare placements.

The gender disparity observed by Sarri et al was consistent with that noted by the Chapin Hall (2009).⁵⁸² However, the emphasis on the vulnerability of males departed from those of US thinktank The VERA Institute (2018)⁵⁸³ which has stated that gender 'can profoundly shape the circumstances leading girls and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and gender nonconforming (LGB/TGNC) children into court and the juvenile justice system for status offenses'.

Criminal Child Exploitation

Young people who go missing have been found to be at risk of exploitation by criminal networks.

In Australia in the late 1980s, the criminal exploitation of young people by adults appears to have been fairly straightforward: recruitment and exploitation through prostitution, and the organisation and distribution of stolen goods. As the Burdekin Inquiry observed, 'property stolen in break and enters was frequently sold to adults to dispose of. In these circumstances the young people received only a small fraction of the actual worth of the property.'⁵⁸⁴

Recent literature from England and Wales^{585 586 587} indicates that criminal child exploitation today has adopted a decidedly less simple or naïve approach. As the Children's Commissioner for England has warned:

'The criminal gangs operating in England are complex and ruthless organisations, which use sophisticated techniques to groom children and chilling levels of violence to keep them compliant. They prey upon marginalised children who have often been let down by multiple agencies.'⁵⁸⁸

There is compelling anecdotal evidence that young people living in OOHC, especially those accommodated in residential units or group homes, are especially vulnerable to criminal exploitation. Advocates have argued that the current structure of the residential OOHC sector, as well as the lack of central government oversight and control, is putting children in danger and enabling the spread of exploitation and criminality around the country, although 'robust data to support this essentially

anecdotal evidence is not yet available, largely because professionals have not been identifying and recording instances' of exploitation.⁵⁸⁹

Exploitation might involve youth being required to steal or being trafficked to work as domestic servants or in cannabis factories.⁵⁹⁰ Recent literature on 'county lines' has identified that children as young as seven are being intentionally targeted, groomed and exploited by criminal gangs to engage in the transporting and selling of drugs.⁵⁹¹

Going missing has been identified as both a risk factor and a potential identifier for 'county lines' related criminal exploitation: 13 percent of children identified as gang associated were subject to a current care order. This is significantly higher than the rate for other young offenders and represents one in eight gang associated youth.⁵⁹²

The involvement of organised criminal gangs has changed the nature of the missing experience. For example, a 2011 study of runaways in Northern Ireland⁵⁹³ found that youth travelled further distances when exploitative adults facilitated and paid for their transport. Trafficking involved being transported to an unfamiliar area, perhaps interstate, or somewhere the victim had no connection.⁵⁹⁴

The recognition of sexual and criminal exploitation in England and Wales has also changed the operations of UK police. There is now a greater understanding that going missing is a sign that child might be in great danger, and police are expected to respond accordingly.⁵⁹⁵

Deaths of missing youth

According to the literature, few missing person cases result in a fatal outcome. In the UK, Newiss⁵⁹⁶ drew on data from the Missing Person Survey to identify that just 0.3 per cent of missing person reports culminated in a fatal outcome (whether by suicides, accidents or homicides). A subsequent study across 14 police forces between 1990-98 identified that reports of missing children aged 14 to 18 were three times less likely to result in homicide than the average, and were 15 times less likely to result in a homicide than the highest risk group (19 to 24). This finding, however, came with a qualifier:

'If it were possible to analyse the number of missing persons (ie individuals) resulting in a homicide enquiry (as opposed to missing person reports, which will have been inflated by the same individuals repeatedly going missing, then the risk of missing persons within this

age group being the victim of homicide would increase. That said, it is likely that the relative risk (ie in relation to other age groups) would remain low'.⁵⁹⁷

There is no Australian national database of the deaths of children and young people in OOHC.

A number of state and territory bodies, notably coroners, Child Death Review Teams, Ombudsman's offices and internal departmental investigators, will inquire into deaths that occur in a number of circumstances including: if a young person is in state care or juvenile detention, is receiving child protection services, is a victim of domestic and family violence, or dies by suicide or fatal assault. Each jurisdiction differs as to what material is made public, and each agency varies widely as to its terms of reference and scope.

Media accounts have provided some information about the circumstances of the deaths of children and young people who have gone missing from OOHC. For example:

- the Australian reported on the 2009 death of a 10-year-old Queensland child who was killed by a car on a dark country road after running away to be with her mother⁵⁹⁸;
- the ABC ran a series of articles on the 2013 overdose death of a 16-year-old Victorian girl in OOHC, who had continually gone missing from residential care⁵⁹⁹;
- the ABC reported on the 2014 death of a 14-year-old South Australian girl who died after climbing an electrical pole after running away from care.⁶⁰⁰

The media has also highlighted cases which illustrate a particular failing of the child protection or OOHC system, for example:

- in 2012 the ABC's Lateline program expose of the NSW and Queensland OOHC systems featured the case of a 13-year-old Queensland girl who died after crashing a staff members' car;⁶⁰¹ and
- in 2018, a special investigation was conducted by the Sydney Morning Herald into the disappearance, presumed death, of a 15-year-old girl from NSW.⁶⁰²

Legislative provisions have recently been adopted in some jurisdictions that seek to prohibit the publication of some agency reports, particularly those which identify a young person as having been in OOHC.⁶⁰³ Legislative provisions enacted in NSW⁶⁰⁴ for example, seek to prevent the publication²⁵ of

²⁵ Without the consent of the Secretary, the Children's Court or a young person over 16 years of age.

media reports and police media releases that state that a child was in OOHC at the time of the child's disappearance. Concerns have been raised that media reports that criticise the way in which the department investigated or handled the fact that a child had gone missing from OOHC may be prevented from being published.⁶⁰⁵ Provisions that limit commentary on missing child cases have been criticised in Canada.⁶⁰⁶

The Independent *Family is Culture Review* (2019) has recommended the NSW legislation be amended to permit a public interest defence, arguing that:

'It is in the public interest that the child protection system be openly scrutinised, analysed and discussed by those involved in or affected by the system, including children, as well as by academics, public interest groups and journalists.'⁶⁰⁷

A focus on the deaths of children or young people who go missing from care has not been the subject of a specific state or territory inquiry. However, the South Australian Mullighan Children in State Care Commission of Inquiry ('the CISC') provides some insight. Its 2008 report detailed a four-year investigation into allegations of the sexual abuse and deaths of children in State care during the 20th century. The CISC conducted an exhaustive examination of the circumstances of the deaths, and reported that 21 children died after going missing from their placements. While the fact that they had run away was recorded in departmental notes, generally there was little, if any, information on departmental files concerning the circumstances of their deaths.

After obtaining the coronial records, the CISC determined that:

- 11 children had died in accidents, mainly in car accidents;
- 2 young people had died by suicide;
- 3 had died because of alleged criminal conduct, including dangerous driving and murder;
- 2 had possibly died due to alleged criminal conduct; and
- 2 cases could not be determined.

One of the most significant examinations in recent years came about because of the murder of 12-year-old Queensland Tiahleigh Palmer. Tiahleigh had been reported missing in an attempt by her foster family to conceal her sexual assault and murder by foster family members. After her murder, the Queensland Family and Child Commission (the 'QFCC') conducted a whole-of-government systems review of the arrangements in place for responding to children missing from OOHC. This included

consideration of whether all government agencies had worked together effectively in responding to Tiahleigh's disappearance.

In a series of reports^{608 609 610} the QFCC identified serious system inadequacies regarding how agencies safeguarded children in OOHC. It recommended that missing children under 13 years should automatically be assessed as high risk, and discouraged the use of criminalising terminology such as 'absconder' to refer to children missing from OOHC. It also advised police that it was critical to gather information about a child who is missing, and highlighted the benefits of cross agency media strategies so as to best support a missing person investigation. It also stated that it was imperative that children who have been missing or absent from their placement are involved in discussions around developing their case plans. This also represented an opportunity to educate young people about their safety, and improve strategies designed to improve their feeling of belonging.

Negative Adult Outcomes

A number of studies have suggested that young people who go missing from OOHC are at increased risk of poor outcomes into adulthood. For example:

- Biehal et al (2003)⁶¹¹ observed that young people who had gone missing from OOHC continued to go missing as adults;
- Hansung et al., (2015)⁶¹² noted that homelessness and illicit substance use continued into adulthood amongst a sample of 110,576 cases of young people aged 12-17 years in OOHC across 39 US states;
- Sarri et.al. (2016)⁶¹³ suggested that youth missing from OOHC may have higher rates of substance misuse, offending behaviour and homelessness into adulthood, due to the consequence of poor socialisation and exposure to street life when they go missing. This study also identified that 32 percent of young males who had committed serious offences before the age of 18, had been charged as adults and had their child welfare status terminated; and
- Chapin Hall (2018)⁶¹⁴ researchers found that there is some evidence that youth who run away while in OOHC are at greater risk of experiencing homelessness after they 'age out' of the care system.

An Australian study by Stevenson and Thomas (2018)⁶¹⁵, which was unusual in its longitudinal approach to the missing youth issue, set out to explore the criminal justice and mental health-related trajectories of a random sample of 215 young people who had been reported missing for the first time in 2005 and followed up for a decade. While it did not focus exclusively on youth missing from OOHC,

it provided some interesting results in adulthood. Based on de-identified data obtained from Victoria, the researchers found that two thirds (65 percent) of the sample had accumulated an offence history, and 68 percent had a victimisation history. Repeat missing youth had worse outcomes than those who had only one missing episode.

ASSESSING VULNERABILITY

Every missing person report made to police in Australia is assessed for risk factors relating to the individual, the circumstances and the environment in which the person went missing. The information considered by police and the risk assessment tools and methods they employ differ in each jurisdiction. Essentially however, the assessment of risk undertaken by each jurisdiction is based on the potential reason/s for the missing event, whether the missing person belongs to a cohort known to be more likely to go missing, if the person has a history of previous missing incidents, and any personal characteristics that may increase a missing person's vulnerability.

Elements that are likely to heighten a missing person's risk or vulnerability include: a mental, cognitive or physical condition, including any need for essential medication; self-harm or suicidal ideation; substance dependency; education, employment or financial concerns; and history of family/domestic violence or other serious family abuse or conflict.⁶¹⁶

Guidance issued to police forces by the UK Home Office directs that police should regard as 'vulnerable' all missing people under 18 years of age.⁶¹⁷ In Australia, police have adopted varying approaches to determining vulnerability based on a missing person's age. For example, following the Queensland Family and Child Commission Inquiry into the reported disappearance and murder of a 12-year-old foster child, all missing youth under 13 years of age are automatically regarded as vulnerable.

Placement in OOHC is of itself, not consistently regarded an indicator of risk in Australia. In Victoria however, police do record whether the subject of a missing person report is a current client of the Department of Health and Human Services, and regard someone in this category who is reported missing to be at significant risk.⁶¹⁸

Safe and Well Checks and Return Home Interviews

In the UK, it is regarded as 'critical'⁶¹⁹ that a young person has the opportunity to speak with someone with whom they feel comfortable, about their missing experience.

Safe and Well checks²⁶ are conducted by police, and are designed to identify whether urgent support such as medical attention is needed, and to ensure that a young person is safe and unlikely to quickly go missing again. They should be conducted as soon as possible after the child returns, and provide an

²⁶ Also referred to as 'prevention interviews' in England and Wales.

opportunity for the child to disclose if they have suffered any harm or if they had offended, or been offended against.⁶²⁰ If after conducting a safe and well check, police believe that there are safeguarding concerns, the child should be referred to partner agencies for follow-up support and assistance.^{621 622}

A Return Home Interview²⁷ ('RHI') is a conversation between a child and a trained professional provided after a child has come back from a missing incident. It aims to uncover information that can help protect children from the risk of going missing again, from risks they may have been exposed to while missing or from risk factors in their home.

It is mandatory to offer RHIs to 'missing' children in England⁶²³, and it is recommended that they be offered to 'missing' children in Wales.⁶²⁴

Both Safe and Well checks and RHIs are used to identify how and why young people go missing, and to organise support for young people when they have returned.

RHIs are seen as an important aid to policing, in that the interviewers are able to facilitate information to assist safeguard vulnerable youth. The level of information gathered about abuse or harm experienced while youth are missing has been shown to be superior to police risk of harm missing person assessments. For example, an analysis of information collected in RHIs involving 200 youth and almost 600 missing episodes, indicated that young people assessed by police as 'low' or 'medium' risk, had experienced serious harm while missing. Young people in OOHC were particularly vulnerable.⁶²⁵

There is some debate in the literature about who should deliver the RHIs: some see them as providing police with an independent source of information that would not otherwise be forthcoming from youth afraid of or unwilling to confide in police.^{626 627} In Scotland⁶²⁸ specialised police officers carry out this role, while in other locations, third sector or voluntary agencies such as Barnardo's or Shelter Scotland conduct the interview service. It has been argued that it is imperative that children in OOHC in particular, are guaranteed an interviewer who is independent of the agency in whose care the child lives.⁶²⁹

There is evidence that RHIs, coupled with follow-up support, are an effective tool in reducing episodes of going missing, giving young people a more positive view of their future, and reducing risk.⁶³⁰

²⁷ Known as 'Debriefs' in Wales.

The implementation of RHIs however, has been criticised^{631 632 633} for:

- inconsistent rollout, leading to a 'postcode lottery' for vulnerable children;
- delivery by non-independent interviewers, potentially compromising the information children give them about the care environment;
- agency failure to comply with the mandated requirement to offer RHIs
- Failing to deliver identified follow-up services;
- Failing to provide information gleaned in RHIs to police for safeguarding purposes;
- Being withheld from vulnerable children on the grounds they are 'Absent' as opposed to 'Missing' from care; and
- Not being offered to 'hard to reach' young people, especially children in care placed out-of-area, trafficked children in care, and Black and Ethnicity Minority youth.

THE CURRENT STUDY

Lack of data

There was very little information provided in the data about the young people's experiences while they were missing. As previously stated, it is unknown if this is a reflection of the process of the data collection undertaken for this particular project, which required considerable manual extraction and recording of information. It could also reflect the more systemic issue of a lack of police intelligence gathering from young people and their carers.

Safe and well checks

Police procedure in most Australian jurisdictions is to conduct a check of a returned missing person to ascertain their safety and well-being. Information on the consistency with which Safe and Well checks were undertaken by police was not able to be determined by reference to the data. Much of the data relating to this field was not completed.

There were repeated references to a young person having been located or returned to their placement 'Safe and Well'. Files also indicated that the police and /or carers had 'Nil concerns' about the young person's condition or experiences on their return.

The quality of this information was suspect. For example, in one jurisdiction, statements indicating that youth missing from care had been located safe and well and that the carers held no concerns for their welfare, sat alongside descriptions of children as young as eight being intoxicated and under-age girls being returned by unknown adult 'boyfriends' to their care homes. Young people with seemingly serious mental health concerns, whose behaviour included laying down in the road and walking in the dark on the wrong side of the road, as well as youth with unexplained physical injuries returning dirty and dishevelled late at night, were recorded as 'Nil Concerns'.

The information that was provided raises concerns. For example, files consistently referred to young people leaving their placements to be with their 'friends' and their 'boyfriends' or 'girlfriends'. There was no information provided on what action police or the carers took in respect of these relationships, although it is noted that many cases did not appear to be regarded with much concern, as a Nil Concerns comment had been made on the file. This was despite the fact that on several occasions police located young girls hiding in the residence of an adult male or group of older youths. In some cases the males were 'known to police' in some capacity.

Mental and physical health concerns

Mental health, medication issues and medical or physical health concerns were identified as giving rise to adverse experiences while young people were missing from OOHC.

As the vignette below indicates, high risk behaviour including self-harm attempts and suicidal behaviour were insufficient to have the young people admitted to a mental health facility for any length of time. In some cases, young people were repeatedly taken to hospital by police because of their troubling behaviour but were discharged shortly thereafter. The cycle of going missing from OOHC then continued, sometimes leading to multiple missing episodes in the one 24-hour period.

VIGNETTE 3

A 15-year-old girl went missing from OOHC over 15 times in the month, sometimes leaving the placement via her bedroom window. Known to be suicidal and depressed, she made several threats to self-harm and was located by police engaged in a variety of unsafe activities.

She was repeatedly taken to hospital by police but was always discharged within hours. Despite this history, her carers frequently reported there were 'Nil Concerns' for her welfare and described her as 'Safe and Well'.

Substance use

The inclusion of Alcohol and Other Drugs (AOD) as an issue of concern in the data is also a likely reflection on the law enforcement approach taken to substance use, particularly by under-age youth, as well as reflecting health concerns relating to overdose or a young person being drug-affected.

In some instances, a young person was identified as being affected by alcohol or other drugs, generally methamphetamine. In some cases drug consumption led to the young person being hospitalised.

On the data supplied it was impossible to determine what action carers and police had taken to identify how the young people had come into possession of the drugs. This is concerning not only because of the risk to the young person's health, but because the literature indicates that grooming of young people by predatory adults engaged in both Child Criminal Exploitation and Child Sexual Exploitation frequently involves the supply of alcohol and other drugs.⁶³⁴

The supply of drugs to minors is a serious criminal offence.

The risks associated with exploitation of vulnerable youth while missing is illustrated in the vignette below. The example of the meth-affected 13-year-old is striking because he fulfils many of the criteria for criminal child exploitation identified in the literature⁶³⁵ notably, the pattern of brief but frequent missing episodes, and his frequent going missing with or meeting up with other youth missing from OOHC.

VIGNETTE 4

A 13-year-old boy went missing from OOHC
on multiple occasions for brief periods.
He returned to his placement of his own accord each time.
On one occasion he was suspected of being affected by methamphetamine.
He often meets up with or returns with other youth missing from OOHC
including an 8-year-old child.

Physical health and injury

The vulnerability of young people is also demonstrated in the fact that a small number of young people were injured while missing. This included apparent accidental injury as well as harm sustained when young people were assaulted.

As Vignette 5 demonstrates, some young people returned to their care placements dirty and dishevelled. This is consistent with the literature that suggests this pattern of missing should be regarded as a red flag for possible sexual or criminal child exploitation.

VIGNETTE 5

A 16-year-old girl frequently went missing from OOHC
for one to two days.

Very little information was available in the notes regarding where she
went or what she did while she was missing.

One entry said she returned to her placement
'filthy and stinks but otherwise OK'.

Victims of crime

As the two following vignettes indicate, young children were not immune from encountering harm while missing. Their circumstances highlight the vulnerability of young people who are not always able to rely on the protection of adults.

VIGNETTE 6

An 11-year-old and a 12-year-old boy frequently went missing
together from OOHC

They sought assistance from at a stranger's house after one was
assaulted.

VIGNETTE 7

A 12-year-old and a 14-year-old boy went missing together
from OOHC

They returned to their placement visibly upset and claiming
that someone had pulled a gun on them.

Sexual exploitation

Young people had regular contact with non-related adults while they were missing. While some of these relationships appeared benign or supportive, for example, a friend's or partner's parents, others were more problematic.

As illustrated by the vignette below, males in young girls' lives were commonly referred to in the data as their 'boyfriends', although some of the contexts in which these girls went missing raised concerns with police. These included an under-age and intoxicated girl being dropped off at her care home late at night by her adult 'boyfriend', and several cases where young people were located hiding in the homes of adult 'friends' known to police.

VIGNETTE 8

A 16-year-old girl went missing from OOHC
18 times in the month
Carers frequently met her in a park or shopping centre to supply food,
clothing and medication
She was repeatedly deemed 'safe and well' or 'Nil Concerns'
On the last occasion she was located by police after three days
at her 'boyfriend's' house
and returned to her placement.

Involvement in the criminal justice system

In several jurisdictions police were involved in young people's lives through the policing of breach of court orders: this accounted for almost 19 percent of cases in one jurisdiction. It is probable that the breaches arose by virtue of the act of going missing, in that leaving a mandated placement address without permission, or not returning in time for a curfew, could violate a condition of bail or probation.

A small number of missing young people were arrested by police. In some cases police involvement had clearly initiated the missing episode, with young people running away from their OOHC placement when police arrived to perform a bail check, to execute a warrant, or in response to a

disturbance at the care facility. For others, police involvement arose when the youth was suspected of committing an offence while missing.

In J3, nine percent of the young people in OOHC were arrested. However, none of the non-care youth who were reported missing were arrested.

Based on the supplied data, it is not possible to conclude that this reflected a generally more punitive policing approach adopted when police responded to youth in OOHC or that it reflects the process of care-criminalisation discussed earlier in this paper.

CONCLUSION

There are approximately 44,900 children and young people under 18 years of age living in Out-Of-Home Care in Australia.⁶³⁶

They comprise under one percent of all young people in the country, yet they made up 53 percent of all young people reported missing and were responsible for 77 percent of missing episodes during the timeframe of this study.

Youth in OOHC also repeatedly went missing during the 30-day study period. They comprised 54 percent of all missing individuals but were responsible for 70.5 percent of all repeat missing youth.

Young people in care are some of the most vulnerable children in the country. Removed from their family by the State, generally for their own protection or wellbeing, children can easily lose contact with their brothers and sisters, their friends, their school and their local neighbourhood. Removal often results in the loss of pets, possessions and things of importance to the children. The removal process itself is often frightening and confusing, particularly if children are placed with adults they do not know. Entering care can mean having to live with older youth in shared accommodation, and running the risk of bullying, intimidation and the damage or loss of the few personal possessions they own. There is no guarantee that a child will be placed with people of the same ethnic or cultural background and Indigenous children in particular may be placed outside of culture and far from country.

Young people have a myriad of needs when they arrive in care. Mental health issues, disability, cognitive impairment and behavioural disorders are not uncommon. Whether these pre-date entry to care or develop while young people are being looked after, the consequences are the same. Residential care is generally regarded as an unsuitable environment within which young people's individual complex needs can be addressed. Unless appropriate forms of care are provided, young people in OOHC are likely to develop a range of troubling and challenging characteristics⁶³⁷ that may place them at greater risk of going missing.

The potential harm posed to young people living in unsatisfactory or unsafe care environments has been well documented. In 2020 alone, at least four inquiries into Australian OOHC systems were announced, including into allegations of institutional abuse,⁶³⁸ poor residential care placement

decisions⁶³⁹ and inadequate reporting practices in relation to sexual abuse.⁶⁴⁰ An inquiry into youth missing or absent from residential care was commenced after this project began.⁶⁴¹

These inquiries underscore a simple point: despite the fact that it exists to provide vulnerable children with a safe, nurturing and healthy environment in which to grow into adulthood, the OOHC system does not always guarantee that children in its care will have their needs met, or be safe and happy.

In Australia, little is known about the reasons young people from care go missing, or their experiences while missing. There is a pronounced lack of academic literature and practical resources targeted towards the experiences and issues affecting young people who go missing from care. There is no national picture about their specific circumstances and no nationally agreed agency response to be applied when they go missing.

The situation is different in England and Wales, where bodies such as The Children's Society, Missing People, Catch 22, Railway Children and Barnardo's have been prolific producers of material about people who go missing. Much of this work has focused on young people's reasons for going missing, their experiences while missing, evaluations regarding various forms of temporary or emergency accommodation offered to runaway youth, and assessments of agency responses to returned youth, such as police Safe and Well checks and independent Return Interviews. Parliamentary Committees, particularly the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults, and the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Looked After Children and Care Leavers, have directed a national focus onto young people who go missing from OOHC.

The UK Government has produced a wealth of legislation, regulations, guidelines, protocols, guides, memorandums, and directives to advise local authorities, police and prosecutors, children's homes, private fostering agencies and other bodies working with children, on mechanisms and procedures designed to safeguard youth at risk of going missing and those who go missing.

Considerable resources and reports have also been created by government and agencies in the United States'. Bodies including the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), the VERA Institute and various state agencies and departments have commissioned research or undertaken their own examination of the factors that shape missing events.

The international experience and literature therefore represent a valuable resource for Australia.

While this study has drawn attention to the extraordinary representation rate of young people in OOHC within national missing person figures, there is a great need to know more about the impact that going missing from care has on the children and young people, their carers and families, police, and the broader community. Importantly, young people in care do not exist in a void. As the Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry (2013) identified, going missing from care is 'a symptom of a residential system under strain'. It is a sign that something is wrong in a young person's life. And regardless of the reasons why a young person may choose to go missing, it is increasingly understood that going missing is an indicator that a child might be in great danger. As the National Missing Persons Coordination Centre has identified:

'Youth go missing to remove themselves from something that isn't making them happy...if underlying factors aren't addressed, issues will likely remain and could lead to the young person going missing again.'⁶⁴²

APPENDIX A: DATA COLLECTION REQUEST

Basic demographic information:

- Age
- Gender
- Indigenous identification
- Ethnic identification
- LGBTI
- Disability
- Intellectual disability
- Other factors

Information specific to the Out-Of-Home Care (OOHC) experience:

- Current experience of OOHC
- Prior experience of OOHC
- Type of OOHC of last placement
- Agency with responsibility for missing youth's care
- Time in OOHC

The missing episode:

- First time missing youth or repeat missing youth (during the month)
- First time missing youth or repeat missing youth (over lifetime)
- Went missing alone or missing with associates
- Timeframe missing

Location details

- Located alive/deceased/not located
- Location found
- How located
- Whether police were notified the young person had returned to placement

Issues during the missing episode (generally obtained from a manual review of the individual young person's file)

- Young person's reasons for going missing

- Details about actions taken by the young person when missing
- Contact with family, friends, education while missing
- Whether concerns were raised regarding the young person on return
- Whether the youth is known to other sections within the police-force (including homicide, sex crimes, child sexual exploitation, and drug trafficking matters) as a victim.
- Whether the youth is known to other sections within the police-force (including homicide, sex crimes, child sexual exploitation, and drug trafficking matters) as an offender.

Missing reports generally

- Number of reports of care-experienced missing youth (13 to 17 years of age)
- Reports of care-experienced missing youth as a proportion of missing youth generally
- Reports of care-experienced missing youth as a proportion of all missing reports received.

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