Missing from care

A literature review

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Contents

1.

Summary

1. Summary

The Victorian Department of Health and Human Services commissioned an independent review about the prevention, identification and response to the sexual exploitation of children and young people subject to child protection involvement. Findings from this independent review have informed the department's response to sexual exploitation.

Following on from this body of work, the department's Office of Professional Practice requested the department's Centre for Human Services Research and Evaluation to undertake a literature review to explore literature about children and young people who go missing from out-of-home care. The Victorian Government Library Service identified articles for the review, and this was supplemented with findings from grey literature.

1.1 Risk factors for missing from care

The review found that a range of environmental and individual characteristics may be associated with increased risk of a young person going missing from care. These characteristics are being female, mid-adolescence age and a history of going missing. A suspected history of sexual abuse and mental health (including substance misuse) concerns may also have an influence. Other possible factors include cultural identity and sexual identity concerns.

There is a lack of understanding about the influence of combinations or accumulation of risk factors. Little is known about relationships between risk factors and whether multiple risk factors increase risk proportionally. The review found one model that identified age, education disengagement, substance misuse and a history of going missing as important predictors of going missing. While the evidence base is emerging, these factors provide a useful starting point for developing risk assessment tools to identify youth at high risk of going missing from care.

1.2 What causes youth to go missing from care?

Multiple reasons may cause a young person to go missing from care. The review found that most research investigated causes of going missing among youth from the family home compared with those from care placements. The key causes identified were difficulty with the care placement environment, an experience of detachment, social reconnection needs and difficulty with the school system. Although the evidence base is limited, it may be useful to consider these causes when developing interventions.

1.3 Responses to youth who go missing from care

Little is known about effective practice to prevent, reduce and respond to youth who go missing from care. No specific strategies for particular age groups or gender types were identified. The review found no evidence regarding culturally appropriate interventions that could be considered in the development of strategies to support young Aboriginal people.

Despite the limited evidence, the review describes a number of promising ideas to assist with the development of advice. Some of the strategies include return interviews, enhancement of protective factors, youth empowerment, a functional analysis approach, stabilisation of care placements through therapeutic models and considerations for developing a multi-agency response.

2.

Missing from care

2. Missing from care

This section describes the purpose of the narrative literature review, which explored missing from care to identify risks, causes and promising ways to respond. This section also provides a brief explanation of the meaning, prevalence and impacts of going missing from care. The subsequent sections of the review discuss findings regarding risk factors, causes and possible ways to respond.

There is growing concern about young people who go missing from care and uncertainty regarding appropriate ways to respond.

2.1 About the literature search

The purpose of the review was to address the following research questions:[1]

1. Is it possible to identify characteristics of young people entering out-of-home care who are more likely to go missing?
2. What are the key push and pull factors that underpin going missing from out-of-home care?
3. Are there any specific strategies that are more successful in addressing these factors? Are there different strategies for particular age groups, gender or cultural groups?
4. What is regarded as best practice in setting child protection practice standards for going missing from out-of-home care?

To achieve this aim, a narrative literature approach was used to explore knowledge about the above questions. See **Appendix 1** for details about the method.

2.2 Defining young people who go missing from out-of-home care

This report uses the terms 'youth' or 'young person' in reference to an individual under 18 years of age. 'Out-of-home' care is used in this report to describe circumstances where a young person is placed in the care of someone other than their parents, such as:

- foster care and intensive foster care
- kinship care
- residential and therapeutic residential care
- an Aboriginal safe house.

There is a lack of consensus regarding the definition of the term 'missing' in reference to out-of-home care. Other words used to describe this phenomenon may include 'absconding', 'self-placed', 'running away', 'location unknown', 'absent' or 'elope'. Examples of definitions are:

> A child or young person under the age of 18 who spends one night or more away from the family home or care without permission, or has been forced to leave by their parents or carers.

> A missing child is one where their location is unknown and there are concerns for their safety and/or wellbeing due to their vulnerability, or where their location has been unknown for more than 24 hours.

> An absconding child is one who has left the placement without permission, however their location is known or they display patterns of behaviour of leaving the placement without permission but always return within a certain timeframe.

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1. Questions are revised from the original task to avoid use of the term 'missing behaviour.'

The ways in which missing from care incidents are measured vary; for instance, it may encompass being reported missing to the police, self-definition or an unauthorised absence overnight. Durations vary considerably.

Debate regarding the preferred use of terms and definitions continues. The Queensland Family and Child Commission advocates use of the terms 'absent from placement' or 'missing from out-of-home care'. Broadly, reasons for this include the following:

- The term 'absconding' is often used when a child from out-of-home care is absent from their placement. Generally, absconding occurs without permission from their carer or residential worker; however, the child's whereabouts are either known or readily confirmed. The definition of 'absconded' may criminalise children who are absent and implies they are fugitives, have escaped or are to blame for their absence.
- Residential facilities are children's homes, and generally a child would not be regarded as having 'escaped' from home.

For the purposes of this report, the term 'missing' is used broadly to mean all forms of absences and incidents where the young person felt forced to leave a residence. The term 'missing' is also used regarding police missing persons reports.

2.3 Prevalence

Statistics on missing persons indicate that young people represent over half of the missing persons population in Australia. The rate of young people who go missing from out-of-home care is poorly understood. Some studies report low prevalence rates of three per cent[2] compared with high prevalence rates of 25–75 per cent.[3,4] Evidence from the United Kingdom indicates 40–50 per cent of children and young people not living with their family are likely to have gone missing.[5] Variations in rates may stem from differences in polices and practice, definitions of going missing, and the way it was measured.

There are no readily available statistics about young people who go missing from out-of-home care in Victoria. Police responses to an online questionnaire for the Australian Institute of Criminology[6] emphasised that youths missing from care facilities accounted for a high proportion of missing persons and consumed a disproportionate amount of resources. Comparatively, a report by the Victorian Auditor-General found that between 2009–10 and 2012–13 the number of incidents in residential care had risen from about 550 to 850. The main cause of this was identified as a marked increase in absent or missing persons reports (see Figure 1).

Rates about patterns of missing incidents are unclear. One study observed youth had 15 or 20 missing episodes within one month;[7] however, this figure is not an accurate representation of the average number of episodes.

2. Fanshel, D., Finch, S. J., & Grundy, J. F. (1989). Modes of exit from foster family care and adjustment at time of departure of children with unstable life histories. *Child Welfare*, 68(4), 391-402.
3. Fasulo, S. J., Cross, T. P., Mosley, P., & Leavey, J. (2002). Adolescent runaway behavior in specialized foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 24(8), 623-640.
4. Nesmith, A. (2006). Predictors of running away from family foster care. *Child welfare*, 85(3), 585.
5. Rees, G. (2011). *Still Running 3: Summary of findings from our third national survey of young runaways*. London: The Children's Society.
6. James, M. P., Anderson, J., Putt, J., & Australian Institute of Criminology. (2008). *Missing persons in Australia* (p. 86). Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology.
7. Beckett, H. (2011). *Not a world away: the sexual exploitation of children and young people in Northern Ireland*. Barnado's Northern Ireland: Belfast.

Figure 1: Category 1 incidents in residential care (including absent or missing reports)

- ●—● Incidents in residential care
- ●—● Incidents in residential care as a percentage of all OOHC incidents

Source: Victorian Auditor-General's Office based on unpublished Department of Human Services data

Generally speaking, according to research undertaken in the United Kingdom and United States of America, young people are more likely to go missing from care than from the family home.

2.4 What happens when young people are missing?

Missing young people are at an increased risk of various concerns including poor education outcomes, offending behaviour, mental health concerns (including substance misuse) and victimisation (such as sexual exploitation). Other health impacts include sexually transmitted diseases, HIV infection and physical illnesses from poor nutrition, poor hygiene and exposure to the elements.[8]

The degree of harm youth face depends partly on their level of maturity, the availability of safe accommodation and the youth's companions.

Safety issues are presumed to reduce for those who stay with friends or relatives compared with those who sleep rough or stay on the street. Youth on the street may develop survival strategies including:

- accessing shelters or emergency care
- staying with strangers
- staying in abandoned buildings
- engaging in criminal activities
- engaging in sexual activities in return for food, shelter, drugs or protection.[9]

8. Slesnick, N. (2004). *Our runaway and homeless youth: a guide to understanding*. Westport (Connecticut): Praeger.

9. Dedel, K. (2006). *Juvenile runaways. Problem-oriented guides for police problem-specific guides series no. 37*. Washington DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, US Department of Justice. http://www.cops.usdoj.gov

2.4.1 Links with sexual exploitation and justice system involvement

One study found young people generally remained in the local area when missing; however, some journeyed to other towns or crossed borders. Some youth travelled longer distances in instances where adults exploiting them facilitated and paid for their transport.[10]

Some youth who go missing are at high risk of sexual exploitation and become involved in pornography and prostitution.[11] Associations between youth with a history of sexual abuse and involvement in sexual exploitation are reported in the literature.[12,13] Qualitative findings reported caregivers' concerns about a number of youth who self-harmed upon return, which was suspected to be a reaction to distressing experiences. This study also reported that youth asked for pregnancy tests and indicated they had likely experienced sexual assaults and unprotected sex. Few youth would disclose what had happened to them, but caregivers strongly believed that those who go missing are at increased risk of sexual exploitation. This assertion was later supported by other evidence, which identified a link between going missing and sexual exploitation in the study population.

Young men are reportedly more likely than young women to have involvement in the justice system when they go missing.[14] Research found more than 40 per cent of young people who go missing from care experience subsequent contact with the youth justice system, compared with young people who had not.[15]

Researchers speculate that as a consequence of socialisation (such as a history of abuse) and exposure to street life (from when they go missing), youth may have higher rates of substance misuse, offending behaviour and homelessness into adulthood.[16]

2.4.2 Searching for missing young people

The length of time that a young person is missing from care varies. For example, in Victoria in 2005–06, 90 per cent of missing persons reported to the police were found within seven days. The police and several non-government organisations may be involved in locating missing young people. Examples of search agencies are:

- Salvation Army Family Tracing Service
- Australian Red Cross Tracing Service
- Link-Up Aboriginal Corporation
- International Social Service.

Assistance may also be provided by the National Missing Persons Coordination Centre and the Department of Foreign Affairs.

10. Beckett, H. (2011). *Not a world away: the sexual exploitation of children and young people in Northern Ireland*. Barnado's Northern Ireland: Belfast.

11. Safyer, A., Thompson, E., Maccio, K., Zittel-Palamara, & Forehand G. (2004). Adolescents' and parents' perceptions of runaway behaviour: problems and solutions. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 21(5):495-512.

12. Tyler, K. A., Hoyt, D. R., Whitbeck, L. B., & Cauce, A. M. (2001). The impact of childhood sexual abuse on later sexual victimization among runaway youth. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 11(2), 151-176.

13. Biehal, N., & Wade, J. (2000). Going missing from residential and foster care: linking biographies and contexts. *British Journal of Social Work*, 30(2), 211-225.

14. Courtney, M. E., & Zinn, A. (2009). Predictors of running away from out-of-home care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 31(12), 1298-1306.

15. Sarri, R. C., Stoffregen, E., & Ryan, J. P. (2016). Running away from child welfare placements: justice system entry risk. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 67, 191-197.

16. ibid.

3.

Risk factors for missing from care

3. Risk factors for missing from care

> **Q1. Is it possible to identify characteristics of young people entering out-of-home care who are more likely to go missing?**
>
> This section provides an overview of important characteristics or risk factors associated with going missing from care. Research has focused on risk factors for youth who go missing from the family home, resulting in limited understanding about those who go missing from out-of-home care. Most out-of-home care research focused on youth from residential or foster care placements (see **Appendix 2**). Very little relates to kinship care. Studies often compared characteristics of young people who have gone missing with those who have not gone missing to identify risk factors. Examples of risk factors and possible risk factors discussed include: design a new plan or adapt the existing plan as needed.
>
> - being female
> - mid-adolescence age
> - history of going missing
> - suspected history of sexual abuse
> - type of maltreatment
> - placement instability
>
> - cultural identity
> - sexual identity concerns
> - disability
> - older age at first removal
> - mental health substance misuse.
>
> **Educational problems and placement instability** are also risk factors, though due to their complex nature are discussed in relation to causes. One model identified age, education disengagement, substance misuse and a history of missing events as important predictors.
>
> Despite these learnings, there is limited knowledge about the influence of most risk factors, in particular gender, mental health and cultural differences. There is an unclear relationship between disability and going missing among young people in care. Greater examination of the combination of risk factors and the influence of environmental and social factors is warranted.

3.1 Risk factors

Certain risk factors predispose a young person to greater risk of missing from care. A range of factors, with varying levels of evidence, are included due to the exploratory nature of the review. These are discussed below.

3.1.1 Being female

Gender is one risk factor frequently reported in the literature. Young women have a greater tendency to go missing from care than young men. Some tentative reasons for gender differences are:

- greater likelihood of experiencing sexual exploitation and abuse
- differential reaction to separation from their biological family (for example, a greater sense of attachment to family)
- may be more likely to have boyfriends and leave to be with them
- caregiving role and/or abuse concerns for other family members.[17]

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17. Fasulo, S. J., Cross, T. P., Mosley, P., & Leavey, J. (2002). Adolescent runaway behavior in specialized foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 24(8), 623-640.

3.1.2 Age

Mid-adolescence age is consistently identified as a risk factor for going missing. Specifically, going missing is less frequent among younger children, peaking at 14–16 years, then decreasing from 18 years.[18,19] (See Figure 2 for an example of the trend found in one study.) Older age at first removal is also associated with going missing from care.[20]

It seems 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.

Figure 2: Age of young people first missing from care placement (n = 155)
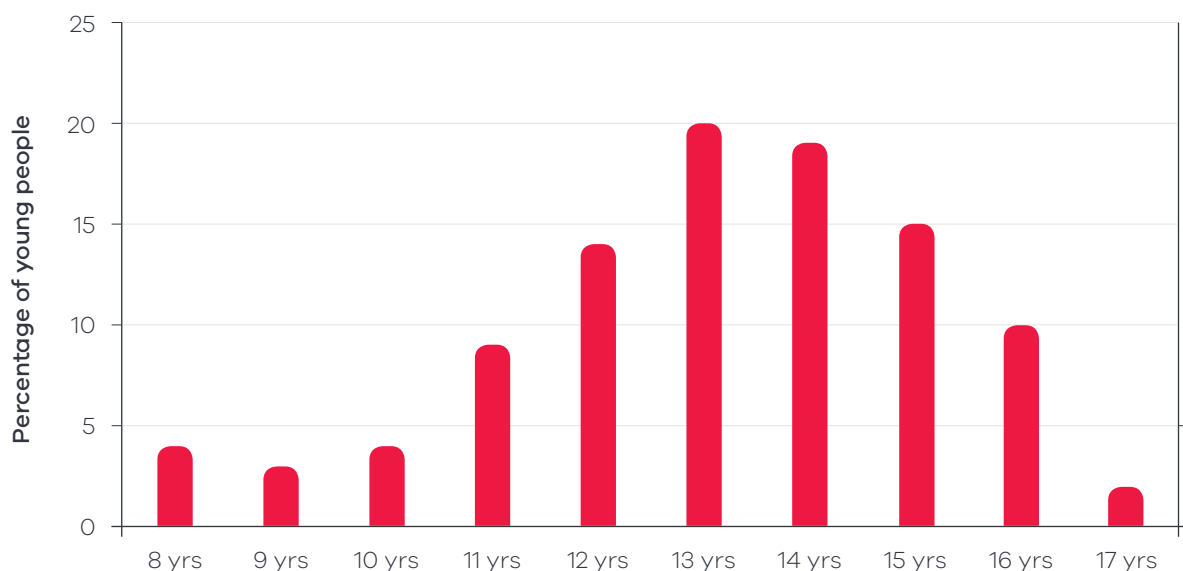
Source: Broad, B., Wade, J., Biehal, N., Clayden, J., & Stein, M. (1999). Going Missing: Young People Absent from Care. John Wiley & Sons, England.

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18. Kim, H., Chenot, D., & Lee, S. (2015). Running away from out-of-home care: a multilevel analysis. *Children & Society*, 29(2), 109-121.

19. Lin, C. H. (2012). Children who run away from foster care: Who are the children and what are the risk factors? *Children and Youth Services Review*, 34(4), 807-813.

20. ibid.

3.1.3 History of going missing

History of going missing is demonstrated as a major risk factor. Findings suggest that each missing event increases the risk of subsequent events.[21]

- Youth who go missing between one week and three months are at greater risk of subsequent missing events compared with those with shorter or longer event durations.
- Findings also suggest that youth who go missing for several days at a time from the family home are likely to engage in similar behaviour as those who go missing from residential placements.[22]

Once a young person has gone missing, they may be at risk of developing a behavioural pattern to do so. This pattern could emerge prior to placement; for instance, a history of physical abuse (especially for boys and young men) increases the likelihood of persistently going missing from the family home. In some instances, it is possible that a pattern of going missing may reflect the young person's learned style of coping in response to difficult circumstances.[23]

3.1.4 Sexual identity

Sexual identity concerns are linked with going missing. A study on youth who used a drop-in centre found over half were trying to be independent and connect with the gay and lesbian community. Youth who accessed the support service were thought to be missing from either family or care. Some suggest that foster caregivers and staff may not have the resources or expertise to:

- protect youth from harassment in group homes
- respond to the unique needs of youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender.[24]

Figure 3: Overview of risk factors reported in the literature

Missing risk factors: Age, *Cultural identity, Gender type, *Mental health (eg substance misuse), Suspected history of sexual abuse, *Type of maltreatment, Older age first removal, Education problems, *Disability, *Sexual identity, Placement instability

* This figure contains some examples of possible risk factors that require more evidence to confirm a relationship with going missing.

21. Courtney, M. E., & Zinn, A. (2009). Predictors of running away from out-of-home care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 31(12), 1298-1306.
22. Sunseri, P. A. (2001). The prediction of unplanned discharge from residential treatment. In: *Child and Youth Care Forum*, 30(5), 283-303. Kluwer Academic Publishers-Plenum Publishers.
23. Kashubeck, S., Pottebaum, S. M., & Read, N. O. (1994). Predicting elopement from residential treatment centers. American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 64(1), 126.
24. Nesmith, A. (2006). Predictors of running away from family foster care. *Child Welfare*, 85(3), 585.

3.1.5 Mental health

The literature varies in relation to the ways mental health concerns are described and reported as a risk factor. Some studies report that youth with mental-health-related concerns were more likely to go missing at a younger age and with greater frequency, and were less likely to return voluntarily.[25] Additionally, diagnosed mental health concerns were moderately associated with going missing. Comparatively, personality disorders and severe mental illness, such as schizophrenia, are associated with reduced risk.

Often risk factors reported in the literature are complex, and it is difficult to clearly separate cause and effect relationships such as with substance misuse. Youth removed from the family home due to parent substance misuse or their own substance misuse may be at risk. Among adolescents, substance use can produce disinhibition, hyperactivity, agitation, hypervigilance, decrease in perception, difficulty coping and impairments in psychosocial and academic functioning.[26] One possible explanation for this link is that the young person may be seeking easier access to the substance. It also seems that side effects from substance misuse could heighten the risk of going missing.

There is a need for future research to examine mental health concerns in relation to going missing.

3.1.6 Suspected history of sexual abuse

History of sexual abuse has mixed results as a risk factor in the literature. One study found **suspected history of sexual abuse** was associated with going missing.[27]

Young women with a history of sexual abuse are more likely to go missing from the family home.[28]

Researchers speculate that youth 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.

3.1.7 Cultural identity

There is mixed evidence regarding cultural identity as a risk factor. Some studies have not found it to be a significant factor,[29] whereas others found Hispanic and African American youth had a higher likelihood of going missing from foster care.[30] Research from the United Kingdom found Caucasian youth are at greater risk, followed by youth with African Caribbean, then Indian/Pakistani/Bangladeshi origins (although this finding includes youth who also left the family home).

3.1.8 Type of child maltreatment

Type of child maltreatment may be an influential factor. Research demonstrates that maltreatment, including physical and sexual abuse, is associated with going missing from hospital and community school populations.[31] While this finding is not specific to out-of-home care populations, it is worth considering because a high number of youth from out-of-home care may have a history of abuse.

25. Broad, B., Wade, J., Biehal, N., Clayden, J., & Stein, M. (1999). *Going Missing: Young People Absent from Care*. John Wiley & Sons, UK.

26. Weiner, D. A., Abraham, M. E., & Lyons, J. (2001). Clinical characteristics of youths with substance use problems and implications for residential treatment. *Psychiatric Services*, 52(6), 793-799.

27. Kashubeck, S., Pottebaum, S. M., & Read, N. O. (1994). Predicting elopement from residential treatment centers. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 64(1), 126.

28. McCormack, A., Janus, M. D., & Burgess, A. W. (1986). Runaway youths and sexual victimization: gender differences in an adolescent runaway population. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 10(3), 387-395.

29. Fasulo, S. J., Cross, T. P., Mosley, P., & Leavey, J. (2002). Adolescent runaway behavior in specialized foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 24(8), 623-640.

30. Lin, C. H. (2012). Children who run away from foster care: Who are the children and what are the risk factors? *Children and Youth Services Review*, 34(4), 807-813.

31. Sullivan, P. M., & Knutson, J. F. (2000). The prevalence of disabilities and maltreatment among runaway children. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 24(10), 1275-1288.

3.1.9 Disability

At present there is limited understanding about disability as a risk factor. For example, one study reported youth who had a communication disability were at possible risk for going missing from care.[32] In contrast, others note youth with a developmental disability or cognitive delay are less likely to go missing from care.[33] Overall, it is unclear whether disability (or particular disability types) may be a risk factor.

3.2 Risk factors for repeatedly going missing

The Australian Institute of Criminology[34] documented potential risk factors associated with young people who were at greatest risk of repeatedly going missing, including young people in care. The risk factors are similar to those described above and are listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Risk factors for young people who repeatedly go missing

Type of risk factor	Description of risk factor
Demographic	• Age (13–17 years) • Gender (female)
Social	• Severe family problems • Severe family disruption • Severe child abuse • Higher levels of parental strictness • Severe school problems • Mental health concerns • Changes in family dynamics
Care placement	• Bullying or sexual harassment • Abusive staff • As a protest against imposed limits • A cry for help

Note: The term 'emotional/behavioural difficulties' was replaced with 'Mental health concerns.'

The factors in Table 1 were identified through consultation with stakeholders, surveys and the literature review.

32. ibid.
33. Courtney, M. E., & Zinn, A. (2009). Predictors of running away from out-of-home care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 31(12), 1298-1306.
34. James, M. P., Anderson, J., Putt, J., & Australian Institute of Criminology. (2008). *Missing persons in Australia* (p. 86). Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology.

3.3 Risk factors for young Aboriginal people

The review was unable to identify evidence about risk factors specific to Aboriginal youth who go missing from care placements. One Queensland study[35] about missing youth in general identified the following risk factors for Aboriginal young people:

- 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
- problems at school related to learning, racism and bullying.

These risk factors should be considered tentatively as they are based on one study and are not specific to care placements.

3.4 Can we predict missing from care?

There is limited understanding about the influence of combinations or accumulation of risk factors for going missing from care.

One of the first studies to develop a model (Figure 4) with multiple risk factors found that age (15–16 years), substance abuse, poor school attendance and a history of going missing predicted going missing from residential care.[36]

While promising, it was developed within the United States and based is on factors selected from the literature.

Further research is required to validate the model in an Australian context.

Figure 4: Predictors of missing from care

Age (15–16 yrs)

Education problems

History of going missing

Substance abuse

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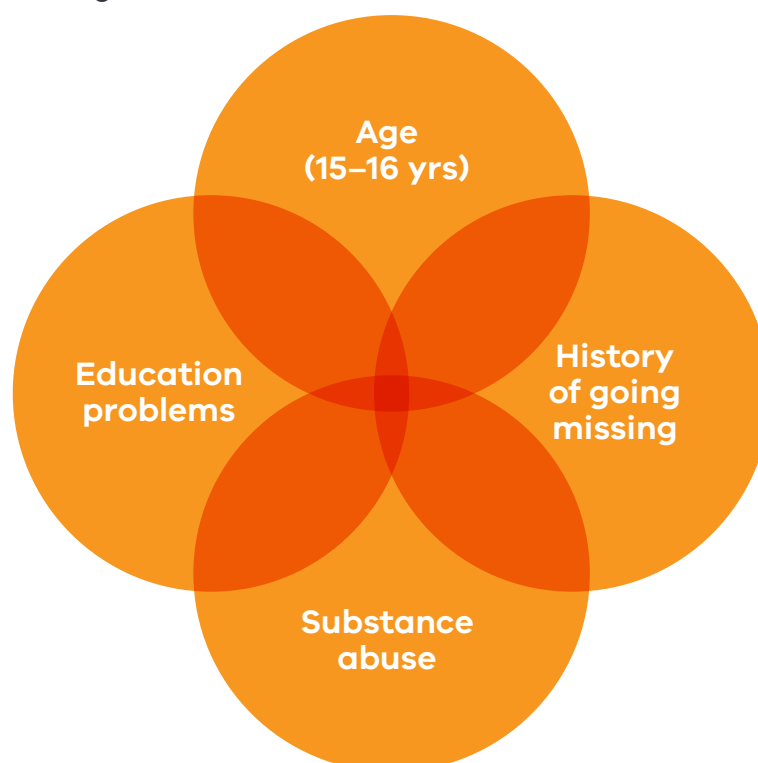
35. Robertson, B & Demosthenous, M (2004). *Young Aboriginal females reported missing to police: 'which way for prevention & service.'* Griffith: Gumurri Centre, Griffith University

36. McIntosh, A., Lyons, J. S., Weiner, D. A., & Jordan, N. (2010). Development of a model for predicting running away from residential treatment among children and adolescents. *Residential Treatment for Children & Youth*, 27(4), 264-276.

4.

What causes youth to go missing from care?

4. What causes youth to go missing from care?

Q2. What are the key push and pull factors that underpin going missing?

This section provides an overview of key causes associated with going missing from care. It is likely that a young person's choice to go missing is provoked by multiple reasons that are interwoven with risk factors. The vast majority of research investigated causes of going missing among youth from the family home, so there is limited understanding about the causes of going missing among youth from out-of-home care. Findings from the literature indicate several key causes:

- difficulty with the care placement environment
- an experience of detachment
- difficulty with the school system
- a need for social reconnection.

Greater understanding about causes is warranted because it is likely that multiple and complex reasons cause a young person to go missing, and these may change for each missing incident and as the young person develops.

4.1 Triggers to going missing

In addition to a range of risk factors, the review identified particular causes that are thought to underpin missing events among youth in care placements. The evidence base on causes is still emerging; however, these are included as exploratory.

4.1.1 Difficulty with the care placement environment

When a child or young person is put in an out-of-home care placement, they may experience unique challenges as they try to live in an unfamiliar environment with unfamiliar people. Historically, researchers argued that institutional characteristics produce missing events. The nature of the placement (such as rules) may increase a young person's sense that they have lost their freedom, control and autonomy. Some argued that going missing is the young person's coping strategy to try to gain independence and self-determination.[37]

Some research identified causes related to the placement, such as:

- communication or relationship difficulties with foster caregivers
- anticipated fear of rejection and abandonment from caregivers
- weak relationships with caregivers
- anxiety and distress from the institutional nature of the residential environment
- a sense of unhappiness in the placement (which may be related to unmet needs such as feeling no one is listening or helping them)
- unfamiliarity with, or no experience of, caregiver concern, boundaries and rules imposed (this may be associated with resentment of boundaries or restrictions)
- the culture of the residential unit, 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.

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37. Karam, R., & Robert, M. (2013). Understanding runaway behaviour in group homes: What are runaways trying to tell us? *Journal of Community Positive Practices*, 13(2), 69.

Related to this cause is **placement instability**, which studies have demonstrated is a risk factor. Increased placement instability increases the risk of going missing, with each additional placement estimated to increase the risk by 70 per cent.[38] Findings suggest that multiple experiences of placement instability have an influence, with youth who go missing from care (such as foster care) having an average of six placements.[39]

Interwoven with this is the finding concerning removal manner; that is, children removed by court orders were more likely to go missing compared with children voluntarily placed in care.

Overall, it seems possible that a missing incident may result from the young person's individual experience of the placement environment. In this way, environmental causes may be interwoven with issues related to communication and relationship difficulties and mental health.

4.1.2 Experience of detachment

Some research identified the general experience of detachment as a cause of going missing. An extensive piece of research undertaken in the United Kingdom ('Still Running') examined missing events among young people, finding that some young people were completely detached from home or care for periods of six months or more before the age of 16 years:

- The experience of detachment occurred on the first or second missing incident. It was often due to the young person's perception or reality that they had no professional help with the problems they experienced prior to detachment.
- Further, while the study found young people in care were more likely to go missing, it was stressed that this pattern often developed prior to placement. The most common reason (80 per cent) for going missing from the family home was problems at home including family conflict, physical abuse, emotional abuse and neglect.[40]

Another study found that young people who frequently go missing and do not typically return to their family or friends are at higher risk of detachment.[41] Going missing was also associated with exclusion, drug misuse and offending behaviour.

From a psychological perspective, the experience of detachment or dissociation from one's environment is often an adaptive response to severe stress or trauma.[42] 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. Dissociation is assumed to be caused by trauma in childhood.

The interferences of traumatic experiences on normal child development are well demonstrated, and this may cause responses in young people such as avoidance, aggression or dissociation.[43] 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.

Unfortunately, little is known about trauma-related symptoms among young people who go missing from out-of-home care. Given that many youth in care have histories of severe stress or trauma, it is worth considering stress responses as a potential complex cause. In other words, going missing may be caused by strong emotions or thoughts that make coping and problem solving difficult for the young person.

38. Courtney, M. E., & Zinn, A. (2009). Predictors of running away from out-of-home care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 31(12), 1298-1306.
39. Kim, H., Chenot, D., & Lee, S. (2015). Running away from out-of-home care: a multilevel analysis. *Children & Society*, 29(2), 109-121.
40. Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, London. (2002). *Young runaways: Report by the Social Exclusion Unit.*
41. Biehal, N., & Wade, J. (2000). Going missing from residential and foster care: linking biographies and contexts. *British Journal of Social Work*, 30(2), 211-225.
42. See <https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/conditionsandtreatments/dissociation-and-dissociative-disorders>.
43. Zelechoski, A. D., Sharma, R., Beserra, K., Miguel, J. L., DeMarco, M., & Spinazzola, J. (2013). Traumatized youth in residential treatment settings: prevalence, clinical presentation, treatment, and policy implications. *Journal of Family Violence*, 28(7), 639-652.

4.1.3 Difficulty with the school system

There appears to be a complex relationship between detachment from school and motivations for going missing. Researchers found detachment from school often occurs prior to placement, while some youth develop non-attendance patterns following placement. The disturbance and stress from pre-care experiences, coupled with distress from separation, are likely to affect a young person's attendance patterns.

Related to this is the finding that education problems are a risk factor for going missing. Studies report an association with school problems;[44] however, specific details of the educational issues are not commonly described. One study[45] found reasons for detachment from school (after placement) were:

- fear of bullying
- difficulty managing group relationships
- feeling that they did not fit in
- mental health concerns (for example, anxiety about their inability to cope with schoolwork)
- difficulty concentrating due to distress from separation
- conflict with teachers (related to difficulty concentrating)
- a culture of non-attendance at their residential unit—for example, peer pressure to not attend, the impact of the unit lifestyle (staying up late, no one else working on homework, realisation staff cannot force attendance).

A missing event may also increase detachment and disengagement from school.[46] The disruption to learning could place youth at risk of poor educational outcomes. One study reported that youth had trouble reintegrating into school life after going missing because they felt they did not belong or had little interest or motivation to attend.

Additionally, exclusion from school, lack of structure and boredom are argued to enhance a young person's vulnerability to street and night life and socialising with other non-school attenders.[47]

Established patterns of going missing and detachment from school appear to be mutually reinforcing. While the relationship is complex, difficulty with the education system does seem to have an influence on going missing.

4.1.4 Social reconnection

A young person's choice to go missing may also be influenced by their goal to reconnect with important aspects of their life outside of the placement. Young people have described the excitement from spending nights in the city centre and having an 'alternative' family on the streets. Youth have also described this lifestyle as dangerous and talked about being drawn into prostitution, drug dealing, substance misuse and offending behaviour.[48]

The literature suggests family-related causes include the young person's:

- preference to be with family
- difficulty accepting family is unwilling or unable to care for them
- attempt to display loyalty to family
- attempt to engineer placement breakdown and then be allowed home
- fear of family relationship breakdown due to the separation.[49]

44. English, N. D., & English, L. M. (1999). A proactive approach to youth who run. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 23(7), 693-698.

45. Broad, B., Wade, J., Biehal, N., Clayden, J., & Stein, M. (1999). *Going missing: young people absent from care*. John Wiley & Sons, UK.

46. McIntosh, A., Lyons, J. S., Weiner, D. A., & Jordan, N. (2010). Development of a model for predicting running away from residential treatment among children and adolescents. *Residential Treatment for Children & Youth*, 27(4), 264-276.

47. Finkelstein, M., Wamsley, M., Currie, D., & Miranda, D. (2004). *Youth who chronically AWOL from foster care: Why they run, where they go, and what can be done*. New York: Vera Institute of Justice.

48. Biehal, N., & Wade, J. (2000). Going missing from residential and foster care: linking biographies and contexts. *British Journal of Social Work*, 30(2), 211-225.

49. Broad, B., Wade, J., Biehal, N., Clayden, J., & Stein, M. (1999). *Going missing: young people absent from care*. John Wiley & Sons, UK.

Some young people may go missing from placements to spend time with and renew important social relationships such as with family, friends or girlfriends or boyfriends.[50] Youth may want to connect for important life events or celebrations such as Christmas, birthdays or New Year. Further, being in long-term foster care increases the likelihood of missing events compared with reunification, adoption or kinship care case plan goals.[51]

In contrast, some young people described the reason for going missing as anxiety or fear of being returned to their family. Despite this, a considerable amount of research suggests that a young person's unmet need for their natural or desired social environment has an influence.

50. Karam, R., & Robert, M. (2013). Understanding runaway behaviour in group homes: What are runaways trying to tell us? *Journal of Community Positive Practices*, 13(2), 69.
51. Kim, H., Chenot, D., & Lee, S. (2015). Running away from out-of-home care: a multilevel analysis. *Children & Society*, 29(2), 109-121.

5.

Possible responses to go missing from care

5. Possible responses to go missing from care

Q3. Are there any specific strategies that are more successful in addressing these factors? Are there different strategies for particular age groups, gender or cultural groups?

Q4. What is regarded as best practice in setting child protection practice standards for youth who go missing from out-of-home care?

The following section provides a foundation of ideas for further consideration to assist with developing advice about youth who are at risk of or who go missing from care placements. The strategies discussed include:

- return interviews
- enhanced protective factors
- youth empowerment
- individualisation of responses through a functional analysis approach
- stabilisation of care placements through therapeutic models
- multi-agency coordinated responses.

See **Appendix 3** for an overview and more examples of responses.

Overall, little is known about effective practice to prevent, reduce and respond to young people who go missing from care. There is also little evidence in the literature that could be used to inform age, gender or culture-specific interventions.

Good practice for early intervention and prevention programs should address risk factors, protective factors and causes for going missing. Unfortunately, the review found a lack of quality evidence that could be used as a basis to recommend practices to prevent or reduce young people going missing from care placements. The strategies in this section are promising and are suggested as ideas for consideration.

5.1 Australian legislation

Each Australian state and territory provides some guidance for responding to missing children and young people, although the detail within procedures and guidelines varies.

Victoria and Western Australia are described as having a higher level of guidance and advice on the event of a young person missing from care. For an overview, see When a child is missing –remembering Tiahleigh – *A report into Queensland's children missing from out-of-home care* Queensland Family and Child Commission (2016).

Broadly, cross-jurisdictional guidance draws attention to factors relevant for risk assessment, such as the young person's age, vulnerability and history of going missing.

Legislation governing public school education systems and public health systems across Australia do not appear to detail specific agency roles and responsibilities in responding to or sharing information when a child is reported missing from out-of-home care.

It is noted though that the principal or an authorised delegate is responsible for monitoring a student's school attendance. In some states and territories, principals are required to contact police to request a child safety check to enhance school attendance.

5.2 United Kingdom legislation (return interviews)

Statutory legislation in the United Kingdom requires local authorities to provide return interviews when a young person is located. The guidance describes a return interview as 'an in-depth interview [that] is best carried out by an independent person who is trained to carry out these interviews and is able to follow up any actions that emerge'.[52]

The purpose of a return interview is to:

* identify and deal with any harm the child has suffered either before or while missing
* understand and address the reasons for going missing
* help the child understand that they have options and to provide them with information on how to stay safe if they go missing again.[53]

Some of the benefits of return interviews are to:

* provide an opportunity for the young person to be listened to
* provide a starting point to develop interventions
* identify exploitation
* build intelligence around sexual exploitation and evidence for prosecution
* reduce financial and social costs (when it leads to fewer missing persons incidents).

Although return interviews are adopted as practice in the United Kingdom, further research and consideration is needed about this approach in the Australian context.

5.3 Enhance protective factors

Findings from the Still Running study undertaken in the United Kingdom suggest a number of factors reduce the likelihood of going missing:

* strong social relationships with family, friends, peers and teachers
* knowledge of what is allowed (specifically caregivers and teachers who describe clear boundaries)
* social and learning skills (specifically problem-solving skills and ways of coping with difficult situations)
* close parental involvement in the young person's life
* a strong and supportive community.

While findings are for young people in general, most factors are relevant for youth in out-of-home care placements. Consideration should be given to interventions that enhance positive social relationships, problem solving and coping skills because these act as protective factors.

5.4 Empower youth

The Commission for Children and Young Person's inquiry report, *As a good parent would*, identified the need to listen to children and young people in care placements. One qualitative study undertaken in Scotland explored experiences of youth in out-of-home care who had gone missing. The study involved peers who interviewed youth with a history of going missing. Factors identified that might prevent future missing events were:

* respect and being able to exercise autonomy
* reminders to stay safe
* providing enjoyable activities and things to do
* staff being helpful and showing empathy (rather than punitive action) when they returned
* providing a sense of support, being listened to and understood.[54]

52. DCSF (2009). *Statutory guidance on children who run away and go missing from home and care*. London: HM Government; and the Revised statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care, DfE (2013), London: HM Government – subject to consultation as of June 2013

53. See <http://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/what-we-do/resources-and-publications/publications-library/here-listen>.

54. Taylor, J., Rahilly, T., Hunter, H., Bradbury-Jones, C., Sanford, K., Caruthers, B., & Ibrahim, N. (2012). *Children who go missing from care: a participatory project with young people as peer interviewers*. NSPCC.

The Children's Society[55] in the United Kingdom reported similar advice from young people about how staff can help prevent youth missing from care placements, including:

- involvement and choices in decisions
- education about dangers when missing such as sexual exploitation, grooming and drug misuse
- engagement through interests and hobbies
- building good relationships between youth and staff
- working with families and key members of the local community to help maintain social connections
- listening to the young people.

The enhancement of protective factors, such as a sense of support from staff, hobbies, empowerment and education about going missing, are likely to be useful aspects to consider in developing intervention strategies for the Australian context.

5.5 Individualise responses through a functional or behaviour analysis approach

Interventions designed to reduce missing events are likely to be more effective if they are sensitive to the unique needs and circumstances of each young person. One approach that could assist when designing individual intervention strategies is a functional or behaviour analysis approach. Generally speaking, this approach involves a pre-intervention assessment of the environmental aspects that maintain the specified behaviour (such as going missing). Information gained from the assessment is then used to inform and devise a tailored intervention plan that meets the needs and circumstances of the individual.

In an out-of-home care context, a functional analysis approach could involve assessing the motivations for going missing, involving youth in the assessment process, and implementing interventions to enhance the reinforcing value of placements for youth to reduce the probability of missing events.

One study investigated this approach to reduce youth going missing from foster care.[56] The approach involved a behaviour analyst who interviewed caregivers and each young person and reviewed their history. Following the assessment process, findings were used to form an understanding about what continued or maintained the action to go missing and what might reduce the likelihood. It enabled the identification of strategies to keep each young person safe and stable in a more preferred placement scenario. The interventions were individually implemented for each young person at their home and school. Examples of strategies are provided in Table 2.

55. See <http://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/>.
56. Clark, H. B., Crosland, K. A., Geller, D., Cripe, M., Kenney, T., Neff, B., & Dunlap, G. (2008). A functional approach to reducing runaway behavior and stabilizing placements for adolescents in foster care. *Research on Social Work Practice*, 18(5), 429-441.

Table 2: Examples of intervention strategies using a functional analysis approach

Category	Intervention
Preference	• Introduce extracurricular activities (such as attending concerts) and preferred activity equipment and materials (such as bicycles). • Establish safe visitation arrangements with preferred people to allow social connections.
Living arrangements	• Involve the youth in determining their preferred type of living situation.
Incentive arrangements	• Establish a 'behaviour contract' so youths can earn rewards based on individual target behaviours (such as requesting permission to go places, completing school homework or reporting whereabouts). • Support older youth in their employment interests.
Staff training	• Conduct training and consultation with caregivers/workers/resource coordinators/supervisors to help provide a more reinforcing approach and environment for youth.

Source: Clark, H. B., Crosland, K. A., Geller, D., Cripe, M., Kenney, T., Neff, B., & Dunlap, G. (2008). A functional approach to reducing runaway behavior and stabilizing placements for adolescents in foster care. Research on Social Work Practice, 18(5), 429-441.

While based on a small sample (*n* = 13), this approach effectively decreased missing time and increased placement stability compared with a matched comparison group (who received services as usual). Another study also found support for the approach, though suggested the need for reassessments in instances where the young person's preferences and motivations change over time to ensure relevance of interventions.

Evidence therefore suggests that a functional analysis approach may be an effective strategy to reduce youth in care placements from going missing. This highlights the potential value for strategies that use assessment to inform individual interventions to reduce missing events.

5.6 Stabilise care placement

Interventions that aim to improve overall outcomes for youth would ideally address a range of their complex needs such as their history of trauma, physical health and mental health.[57] Moreover, interventions that improve the ability of caregivers to support youth could reduce placement breakdown. A literature scan recently undertaken by the Centre for Research and Evaluation identified strategies to improve the stabilisation of care placements among children and young people. Effective programs identified in this scan are briefly described in Table 3.

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57. McCouglin, P. J. & Gonzalez, R. (2014). Healing complex trauma through therapeutic residential care: The Lighthouse Foundation therapeutic family model of care. *Children Australia*, 39(3), 169-176.

Table 3: Programs found to reduce placement instability

Program type	Summary
Treatment-oriented forms of out-of-home care	• This provides a therapeutic home (or home-like) environment with carers trained and supported to care for children and young people with serious mental health problems or serious medical conditions. • For foster care, programs include trained foster carers with ongoing supervision and support, family therapy, psychological or psychiatric services. • This type of program typically has a six to 12-month duration.
Treatment or therapeutic residential care	• This is a model of residential care targeted at young people with the most serious trauma-related physical and mental health concerns. • The model comprises therapeutic specialists, trained staff with consistent rostering, a home-like environment, care team meetings, engagement and participation of young people and exit planning and post-exit support.
Trauma-informed therapeutic interventions	• These interventions are designed to respond to mental health concerns, particularly to avoid placement breakdown by giving carers and young people access to specialised assistance. • Examples include multi-systemic therapy for child abuse and neglect, attachment and bio-behavioural catch up, trauma-focused cognitive behavioural therapy and lifestory (a narrative-based intervention). • These interventions are used in any care setting.

Although evidence regarding these programs did not report effects on missing events, the association between placement instability and going missing suggests improved placement stability could have positive effects.

5.7 Develop a coordinated multi-agency strategy

When a young person is missing, it is often an indication that they are at risk of harm and in need of a safeguarding response. Collaboration between multiple agencies[58] such as the Department of Health and Human Services, the police, education providers and Aboriginal services to identify and share information about concerns for a young person's safety when missing from care may be useful. A coordinated strategy could improve ways to develop and implement both prevention strategies and effective responses. Missing incidents are often complex, and one agency alone is unlikely to implement an effective solution.

Steps to facilitate collaborative and coordinated responses would be enhanced through shared understandings about missing events. This could be partly addressed through:

• adopting the same definitions about 'run away', 'missing' and 'absent' youth to enable effective collection and sharing of information about the children and young people of concern
• reviewing and developing local and regional protocols that outline responsibilities and procedures for sharing information across different agencies responding to concerns about young people at risk of or who go missing.

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58. Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) (2005). *Manual of guidance for the management of missing persons*. London: ACPO.

5.7.1 Education

Education professionals are in a key position to assist with early identification and intervention responses for youth at risk of going missing. Effective strategies should involve a partnership approach with education professionals.

Several education and school-related strategies to address missing events have been implemented in the United Kingdom. School professionals:

- undertake training courses to improve awareness about the reasons youth go missing, indicators of going missing (dirty clothes, hunger, lateness, tiredness) and ways to support youth who go missing
- are encouraged to recognise any unauthorised absence from school as an indicator of being missing and subsequent risk of harm or exploitation of the young person
- are required to notify local authorities of every student who has been continuously absent (unauthorised) for 10 school days or who fails to attend regularly. It is considered good practice for schools to inform local authorities of patterns of absence when they have concerns for the young person's wellbeing, whether the absence is authorised or unauthorised.[59]

Education professionals could support early identification of youth in need through monitoring attendance patterns and prompt notification of concerns to local authorities. Providing additional support when needed could prevent the young person's problems escalating. For instance, statutory guidance in the United Kingdom requires school staff to undertake an initial assessment of need and to hold a multi-agency meeting when there are concerns about a young person who has gone missing.[60]

The strategies above have promise; however, limited resources and staff roles for school attendance concerns are described as barriers to interventions in the United Kingdom's education system. Similar issues are likely to arise and need attention when developing coordinated strategies with the Australian education system.

5.7.2 Police

Police services across Australia provide a crucial role in response to reports of missing persons. Police may encounter youth missing from care in a variety of ways such as while on patrol, investigating missing persons reports or through criminal investigations. While a young person being missing is not described as a crime, the young person may be at high risk of becoming a victim or perpetrator of a crime while missing.

Police responses often focus on harm minimisation and efforts to locate the missing youth. Coordination between government and non-government agencies could be useful for police responses to young people who are missing from care.

Examples of coordinated models between the police and other services include family violence intervention models and the Joint Investigation Response Team in New South Wales. This is a partnership between the New South Wales Police force and the Department of Community Services to investigate child abuse and neglect.

A response from the Association of Chief Police Officers (United Kingdom)[61] to an inquiry about youth who go missing described the development of a coordinated response to child protection. This response highlighted:

- the importance of the police response being part of a multi-agency approach to better track, protect and safeguard exploited children and young people:
  – Good practice example: A protocol was agreed across West Sussex police and multiple agencies to establish procedures to be followed that reduce the number of youth missing from care.

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59. See <http://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/tcs/lessons-to-learn_final.pdf>.
60. DCSF. (2009). *Statutory guidance on children who run away and go missing from home and care*. London: HM Government.
61. See <http://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/what-we-do/resources-and-publications/publications-library/all-party-parliamentary-groups-inquiry-lo>.

- Example around sexual exploitation: Neighbourhood police teams and staff from care placement accommodation are working to develop a relationship in the Humberside region. Work involves a multi-agency meeting and information sharing to improve the nature of action plans and service responses for the child or young person.
  - The 'Textsafe' initiative allows police to share details of missing people with the 'Missing people' charity, which sends supportive text messages to youth and offers help and advice while they are missing.
- a lack of information about young person as a key barrier to finding youth:
  - There is a need to develop a process that allows all agencies to pass on information that will identify those who pose a risk to the young person so appropriate interventions can be implemented.
- the need to improve responses to young people who repeatedly go missing:
  - Police are raising awareness among staff about risks to youth who repeatedly go missing through training and bulletins.
  - Missing person coordinators or an equivalent role could undertake proactive analysis of all missing and absent reports to ensure action is taken in relation to youth who repeatedly go missing so all partners are engaged where appropriate. This process should ensure at-risk youth are identified and meetings held with local partners to discuss specific cases to reduce repeat missing incidents.

Further, the United States Department of Justice suggested several strategies for police responses to missing youth, some of which are incorporated into Appendix 3.

5.7.3 Aboriginal support services

Little is documented about what would be the most appropriate response for supporting Aboriginal youth who go missing. Some recommended strategies include:

- developing and strengthening partnerships with Aboriginal community representatives and the education sector (especially schools)
- developing and implementing school-based programs that target risk factors at school.

Collaboration with Aboriginal support services is critical because they are in a unique position to assist in instances where the young person identifies with Aboriginal culture. One example of a related service is the non-government body Link-Up Aboriginal Corporation. Link-Up is represented in all Australian jurisdictions and has expanded its scope to include missing persons as well as those from Stolen Generations. It provides support to children, youth and families who have been removed from their natural families. It also offers support and advocacy for Aboriginal foster caregivers.

More research needs to be conducted about young Aboriginal people in care placements who go missing, how this can be prevented, the types of agencies that should be involved, and the role of the police.[62]

Overall, the content above provides a foundation of ideas to assist with developing advice about youth who are at risk of or who go missing from care placements.

62. James, M. P., Anderson, J., Putt, J., & Australian Institute of Criminology. (2008). *Missing persons in Australia* (p. 86). Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology.

Appendices

Appendix 1. Method

The Victorian Government Library Service provided results from a literature search. Details about the search are noted briefly below.

- Keywords used included:
  - out-of-home care, foster care, foster home, kinship care, kin care, residential care, permanent placement, placement, residential treatment, group homes, institution, state ward, state care, cottage home, foster children
  - runaways, runaway children, missing, runaway, abscond, absent, elope, AWOL, run away behaviour
  - children, young people, youth, adolescent, teenage.
- The publication timeframe ranged from 1994 to 2016.
- A range of databases were searched, such as the Humanities and Social Sciences Collection and the Psychology and Behavioural Sciences Collection.

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The library search elicited 51 articles. Articles were screened through a preliminary reading of titles and abstracts. They were included if they concerned young people missing or who had run away from out-of-home care. Articles were excluded if they focused on:

- youth who were abducted, lost or absconded from psychiatric hospitals or their biological family home
- youth in homeless or crisis shelters (unless out-of-home care was specifically mentioned as a subgroup).

After screening for and removing duplications, 34 articles remained for consideration. A secondary search was undertaken to supplement the results, including documents from grey literature, to assist with information regarding strategies and interventions. The findings from the analysis of documents were used for the purposes of this review.

Appendix 2. Overview of risk factor research

The evidence base regarding risk factors for going missing among youth in care placements is limited. The ways in which particular terms are understood and used in the literature may differ from Victorian Government definitions. Risk factors are described for the purposes of further consideration regarding developing advice.

Residential care

Study	Design	Examples of key findings
Attar-Schwartz, S. (2013). Runaway behavior among adolescents in residential care: the role of personal characteristics, victimization experiences while in care, social climate, and institutional factors. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 35(2), 258–267.	• Examined the occurrence and multilevel correlates of missing events among Israeli Arab and Jewish adolescents aged 11–19 in residential care for at-risk children. • Hierarchical linear modelling used to examine data from a questionnaire.	• Frequent missing events are associated with older age, a longer time in an institution, experiences of violence by peers and staff at residential care, and perceiving staff as strict and unsupportive.
Eisengart, J., Martinovich, Z., & Lyons, J. S. (2008). Discharge due to running away from residential treatment: youth and setting effects. *Residential Treatment for Children & Youth*, 24(4), 327–343.	• Data from a statewide outcomes management system for residential treatment were used to study youth. • Statistical tests (such as logistical regression) used to predict elopement.	• Gender and substance use is associated with the risk of discharge due to going missing. • Provider variation accounted for a 10% variance in going missing among clients, though details of program differences were unavailable.
Kashubeck, S., & Pottenbaum, S. M. (1994). Predicting elopement from residential treatment centers. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 64(1), 126.	• Study involved comparisons with youth in residential treatment. Youth are described as being unable to function within their home community. • Matched a sample comparison between young people who have or have not engaged in absconding behaviour.	• Young people who go missing are more likely to have a history of elopement, higher rates of residential instability, a suspected history of sexual abuse, mental health concerns, and parents whose rights had been terminated.
McIntosh, A., Lyons, J. S., Weiner, D. A., & Jordan, N. (2010). Development of a model for predicting running away from residential treatment among children and adolescents. *Residential Treatment for Children & Youth*, 27(4), 264–276.	• Data on youth in residential treatment. • Statistical tests such as logistic regression used to identify significant predictors of residential treatment discharge due to elopement.	• Risk factors include age, substance abuse, school attendance issues and ideation of going missing.

Study	Design	Examples of key findings
Miller, A., & Eggertson-Tacon, C. (1990). Patterns of runaway behavior within a larger systems context: the road to empowerment. *Adolescence*, 25(98), 271.	• Analysis of a case study and survey of nine clients in residential treatment.	• The number of missing events increased after placement. • Young people reported going missing as a response to disagreements with the 'house rules'.
Sunseri, P. A. (2001). The prediction of unplanned discharge from residential treatment. In: *Child and Youth Care Forum*, 30(5), 283–303). Kluwer Academic Publishers-Plenum Publishers.	• Data analysis undertaken on youth in residential care facilities in California.	• Adolescents who are most likely to terminate treatment by going missing are those who have prior histories of going missing, are placed into low-level facilities, come from low-functioning families or have mental health concerns.

Foster care

Study	Design	Examples of key findings
Fanshel, D., Finch, S. J., & Grundy, J. F. (1989). Modes of exit from foster family care and adjustment at time of departure of children with unstable life histories. *Child Welfare*, 68(4), 391–402.	• Study on youth from foster care placements. • Content analysis on case records of clients from one agency.	• Failed placements (including youth clients who go missing) are associated with a history of physical abuse, having experienced more living arrangements prior to separation from their biological family, and being hostile and negative at entry to care.
Kim, H., Chenot, D., & Lee, S. (2015). Running away from out-of-home care: a multilevel analysis. *Children & Society*, 29(2), 109–121.	• Examines data on children from out-of-home care – the majority appear to be foster care placements. • Multilevel analyses on the dataset.	• Risk factors include children's ages (older), gender (female), diagnosed clinical conditions, family structures, the number of removals, the number of placements, the removal manner and case plan goals.
Lin, C. H. (2012). Children who run away from foster care: Who are the children and what are the risk factors? *Children and Youth Services Review*, 34(4), 807–813.	• Examined data on youth from foster care placements. • Descriptive statistics and other statistical tests on secondary data from a federal dataset to identify risk factors.	• Risk factors include older age (average 16 years), gender (female), ethnicity (African American), older age at first removal from the biological family (average 11 years), a larger number of placements, mental health concerns and being from single-caregiver families.

Study	Design	Examples of key findings
Nesmith, A. (2006). Predictors of running away from family foster care. *Child Welfare*, **85(3), 585.**	• Data on youth in foster care placements. • Multiple failure time hazards model used to examine data from a foster care agency over two years.	• Missing events increased with time in foster care placement. • Factors that increase the odds of absconding include ethnicity (American Indian), older age and a history of going missing.
Courtney, M. E., & Zinn, A. (2009). Predictors of running away from out-of-home care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, **31(12), 1298–1306.**	• Statistical tests (such as multivariate analysis) on data about youth in foster care from three state management information systems.	• Age, gender, ethnicity, mental health concerns and substance misuse predict going missing from care.

Mixed care types or not specified

Study	Design	Examples of key findings
Fasulo, S. J., Cross, T. P., Mosley, P., & Leavey, J. (2002). Adolescent runaway behavior in specialized foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, **24(8), 623–640.**	• Study on youth who went missing from specialised foster care. • Descriptive statistics and logistic regression used to examine and predict absconding behaviour among young people in specialised foster care.	• Most young people absconded within the first six months of their placement. • Young women were more likely to go missing from care. • Ethnicity, age, length of stay and history of sexual abuse were not significant predictors. • Higher rates of therapy sessions were associated with a decrease in going missing.
Biehal, N., & Wade, J. (2000). Going missing from residential and foster care: linking biographies and contexts. *British Journal of Social Work*, **30(2), 211–225.**	• Qualitative analysis of interviews and focus groups. • Statistical (multivariate) analysis used to profile youth.	• Negative peer culture (bullying by clients, culture of non-attendance at school, involvement in offending) in the residential house is associated with high rates of missing events. • Youth are motivated by peers to go missing in an attempt to avoid bullying and to commit offences. They are influenced by people living on the streets and can be drawn into sexual exploitation (prostitution). • Most youth involved in prostitution while missing have a history of sexual abuse and also physical abuse, rejection or neglect.

Study	Design	Examples of key findings
Courtney, M. E., & Yin-Ling Irene, W. (1996). Comparing the timing of exits from substitute care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 18307-334. doi:10.1016/0190-7409(96)00008-4.	• Study on data about children who entered substitute care and exit pathways (such as adoption, missing or discharge to family). • Risk analysis on administrative data exploring three types of exit from substitute care.	• The likelihood of exiting from care due to going missing is highest during the first few months of care. • Older age and gender (female) is associated with higher risk.
English, N. D., & English, L. M. (1999). A proactive approach to youth who run. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 23(7), 693–698.	• Study focused on youth from a particular district who had gone missing from the child welfare placement. All were reported missing to police. • Descriptive statistics used to examine the demographics and characteristics of young people who absconded from one agency.	• Most young people who go missing are young women. • Most engaged in repeatedly going missing – 12 of 65 absconded 31 times. • Most were in emergency care. • Young people who go missing have higher rates of mental health concerns, education problems and child welfare placements.

Appendix 3. Overview of possible responses

Before missing

Type of response	Key aspects
Provide prevention materials	• Caregivers could be provided with information on conflict resolution strategies and resources for additional adult and youth-specific support. Referrals may include school-based support, preservation and mediation services, counselling programs and caregiver support services. • Information campaigns and education strategies to raise awareness about going missing.
Use respite care	• The action to go missing is provoked by various reasons, one of which can be an escalation in conflict. In some circumstances caregivers and youth may benefit from temporary separation through use of a respite care facility and participation in counselling to resolve the conflict and prevent future issues.
Conduct a risk assessment	• The development and use of risk assessment tools to identify youth at high risk of going missing could lead to implementing effective prevention strategies. • A multi-agency approach to identifying youth at high risk would strengthen prevention and response efforts. • Risk assessment procedures are important for the police due to the high volume of missing persons reports. • School services could assist with early identification for youth at risk of going missing.
Enhance protective factors	• Caregivers should direct efforts towards factors that reduce going missing (such as strong relationships, problem solving and coping skills, engagement in interests and hobbies, education about the dangers of going missing, opportunities for involvement in decisions). • Consideration should be given to therapeutic models of care to address the complex needs of youth.

When reported missing

Type of response	Key aspects

Use 'Missing from care' forms	• When youth are reported missing from care, caregivers could provide police with information designed to help locate the youth.
	  – Additional data collection measures should be carried out when a young person is placed in care to assist with locating them, such as: taking a photograph; noting their physical description, clothing, bags and so on; their mobile phone details; and any information about contacts.
	  – Caregivers need to provide police with details of risks to the individual, including information on the client's background and details about their previous missing history.

While missing

Type of response	Key aspects
Refer youth to appropriate social service providers	• Police encounters with youth should encourage access to services that address their needs such as: drop-in services that provide food, clothing, crisis counselling and medical attention; counselling services for special issues such as sexual orientation, substance misuse and mental health concerns; and short-term, safe overnight shelter accommodation options
Implement specialised patrols	• Increased patrols in locations where youth congregate may deter criminal activity and create opportunities for police to contact and refer youth to services as needed. • In the United States, specialised 'run away' officers intervene with youth and coordinate with other units investigating those who exploit missing youth.
Provide safe locations for youth	• Local agencies and businesses (such as community centres, libraries and fire stations) could provide a temporary safe location for youth who are missing and are seeking an escape from the street or other dangerous situations. • Opportunities for youth to contact local services could also moderate further harm.
Use secure placement	• In some circumstances, the use of a secure placement may be needed to protect youth at immediate risk of serious harm or high-risk behaviours (such as prostitution, substance misuse, suicide or self-harm).

When found

Type of response	Key aspects
Refer to after-care services	• Active referrals for follow-up services may help resolve care placement problems and prevent missing events. • In some circumstances, it may be appropriate for police to make active referrals to local service providers.
Interview youth upon return	• Interviews with youth when they return can yield important information for addressing care placement problems and preventing subsequent missing events. • Youth may be reluctant to disclose important facts, so careful consideration should be given to who is best suited to conduct the return interview.
Intervention and prevention	• Strategies to prevent future missing events should address the unique needs of the youth. Use of a functional analysis approach could assist in developing interventions. • Consideration should be given to multi-agency approaches that could involve police, education, health and human services, community service organisations and Aboriginal support services.