Support needs of family and friends of long-term missing persons

…towards effective assistance for those who grieve…

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INTRODUCTION

“You’re lucky you were saved the cost of a funeral.”
“All I wanted was to speak to someone in the same position.”

These two comments, the first reported to be from a counsellor to the spouse of a missing person, and the second from the spouse of a missing person, demonstrate the need for more appropriate and adequate support for families and friends of missing persons.

Previous studies have demonstrated that assistance for relatives and friends involved with missing persons is frequently neither relevant nor readily available. This research project is an attempt to determine the level and nature of support that would best fulfil the needs of a diverse range of families and friends.

Australian literature and research on issues relating to missing persons is still very limited in range. One of the most widely recognised and comprehensive reports, *Missing People Issues for the Australian Community* (Henderson & Henderson, 1998), identifies eighteen areas in need of improvement, most being related to the provision of support services for relatives and friends of missing persons. It is clear that four years later some of these problems have not yet been resolved. The report states, “There was strong support for a service specialising in missing person issues, although the sorts of service people considered it should provide varied.”

This report was followed by paper 144, *Missing Persons: Incidence, Issues and Impacts*, (Henderson, Henderson & Kiernan, 2000). Written two years later, the paper summarises the earlier Henderson Report. It indicates that though some needs of people involved are being better recognised and addressed, in certain areas support needs remain unmet.

The more recently written report, *Best Practice in Counselling Models Relevant to Families and Friends of Missing Persons*, (Hunter Institute of Mental Health, 2001), provides an extensive overview of the relevant literature. It also outlines various counselling models and their suitability for use with missing persons-related support services. Eight recommendations are made, for the provision of more appropriate training for those providing support services, and for suitably trained counsellors to be clearly accessible to their client base.

The focus of the current report is on the various support needs expressed by relatives and friends of missing persons and how these needs can most satisfactorily be met.

OBJECTIVES

The key objective of this study is to examine the support needs for the diverse client base of family and friends of long-term missing persons, and to assess the best ways of meeting these needs.

Needs to be met include a range of services such as search assistance and contact with the media. Information on other topics, including the Privacy Act, legal issues in NSW and interstate, and Coronial enquiries are also required. There is also a need for counselling, appropriate to the circumstances of the event and the people involved.

Investigating both the type and the delivery of these services in rural, regional and metropolitan areas is essential to a successful outcome. People living in rural and even regional areas are potentially more likely to have difficulty accessing services and are therefore more likely to experience feelings of frustration, anger and isolation. Another outcome of this research would be to reduce these feelings by providing people with a chance to voice their concerns and contribute to the process of designing accessible support services.

Research in this area also includes the involvement of marginalised young people who could possibly be registered as missing persons themselves. This could provide information on awareness of available services, such as the Kids Help Line, at the consumer level.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Consultative processes were designed to gain information from a broad range of people. The specific methods include a series of interviews, group discussions and self-completion questionnaires mailed to families and friends of missing persons in NSW. This ensured participation by people in metropolitan, regional and rural areas throughout New South Wales.
Phase I: Interviews

Interviews with community organisations actively participating in the field of missing persons were conducted either by telephone or in person. These organisations include: workers from the Wayside Chapel and the Migrant Resource Centre (Wollongong), the Exodus Foundation, Link-up (NSW) Aboriginal Corporation, the Alzheimer’s Association, Lions Identikid, Australian Red Cross, International Social Services, the NSW Association for Mental Health, the Salvation Army, 20-10 (reconnect programme), Gay and Lesbian Counselling Service, as well as Mission Australia, the NSW Police Missing Persons’ Unit and the National Missing Persons Unit. Interviews with individuals working in the field, or family members of missing persons who lived far from Sydney, were also conducted by telephone.

Phase II: Focus groups

Focus groups were designed to facilitate comprehensive discussion on support needs, and were primarily based on the questionnaires. Focus groups were held in Newcastle and Sydney and public meetings were held in Coffs Harbour and Wollongong. Contacts for these meetings were arranged through the Missing Persons Committee of NSW Inc. or people contacted as a result of the questionnaires.

Newcastle and Wollongong were selected, as they are the two largest regional centres in NSW. In both of these areas families of people who are missing indicated a keen interest in attending focus groups. Coffs Harbour was the rural centre selected as it has the highest population of missing persons of any rural town in NSW (statistics from NSW Police, 29 November 2001).

A public meeting for young people (21 and under) was arranged in conjunction with a youth worker from the Wayside Chapel, as well as discussions with marginalised youth on the streets.

Phase III: Self-completion questionnaires

Two questionnaires were devised for the third phase of the research. One was for family or friends of missing persons (Appendix 1) and one for youth who may be missing to their families (Appendix 2).

Questionnaires with cover-letters from the researcher and the Team Leader, Community Tracing Section, were mailed to 106 families of missing persons. Contact details for families were provided through the NSW Police Missing Persons Unit, by an officer familiar with the cases, who selected those most appropriate. In some cases, such as people who are AWOL from the Defence Forces, or where families asked not to be contacted unless there was definite news of the missing person, families were not sent the questionnaire.

Cases of missing persons reported by people other than family, such as colleagues, friends, or boarding-house managers, or whose families are overseas, were also not appropriate for this study. Some people had no listed next of kin to contact and some have moved without leaving contact details. In eight cases where more than one contact name was given (usually the names of both parents), two questionnaires were sent. As the contact details provided by the Unit were those of the person who made the initial report to police, immediate family and partners were contacted, rather than extended family or friends.

Questionnaires were also distributed to people attempting to trace family members through the Salvation Army.

Youth questionnaires were dispersed at the public meeting for youth and through youth workers at the Wayside Chapel, 20-10, (Reconnect programme) and Rough Edges, Darlinghurst.

DETAILED PRESENTATION OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

Phase I: Interviews

A number of concerns and recommendations were raised as a result of the interviews.

One of the main concerns expressed by some organisations is the definition of “missing” and how this is integrated with the associated emphasis on criminal justice and the linking of missing persons with the Victims of Crime Bureau. A more multicultural and global approach would be preferred by agencies working with people separated through adoption, family disintegration, government intervention or illness.
Another major concern is the limitations imposed by the Federal Privacy Act on tracing agencies and non-government organisations. Agencies working together may better address issues and apply pressure to gain access to information.

The Salvation Army stressed their awareness of the need for follow-up mediation and counselling after family members are reunited. This may play an important role in preventing people from repeatedly going missing.

A further concern is that when a person goes missing the dynamics of the whole family are often affected, so support groups facilitating the meeting of families with other families could be helpful, particularly to siblings or children of missing persons. The difficulty of finding suitably trained health professionals was mentioned. It was suggested that peer support groups run by relatives of missing people and coordinated or supervised by health professionals could be advantageous.

Counselling and support services face additional complications where interpreters are required. The client may feel uncomfortable about speaking freely and about confidentiality within a smaller ethnic community. This can be a difficulty, particularly in regional areas or rural areas. It is also possible that people from NESB backgrounds may not know when and where such services are available to them.

### Phase II: Focus Groups

The focus groups, though based on the questionnaires, provided much more in-depth answers and more detailed information on the support services that people require.

#### Newcastle

A focus group of eight people met on 27 November 2001. Five people from this group had daughters or stepdaughters who have been missing for over twenty-two years. At the time when they went missing attitudes in the community and the police force were quite different. The experiences of these families led to changes both in police response and community attitudes.

A problem raised at this meeting was the lack of helpful counselling. One relative discussed her experience with a counsellor: she said that after being told that she was lucky not to have to pay for a funeral, she felt like walking in front of a car. She certainly did not take her son to see anyone, even though at the time he was so fearful that he would not sleep in his own room, and even now is “…not good with adults any more.” A second counsellor did not appear to listen to her needs, pushing her to make plans for the future, which she did not feel able to do at that stage.

It was noted that while some people were critical of the original police response in 1979, they were greatly encouraged by Police Task Force Fenwick. A significant obstacle is that of funding a coordinator to assist with difficulties such as: rewards, access to media, publicity and Coroner inquiries. Search assistance also requires a paid “head-kicker”, “…because dealing with government red tape is so overwhelming, you just get burnt out.” (Quote from group participant). All the participants said that it would have been helpful to have had contact with people in similar circumstances and that they would join a support group if it were available. Three people had already been involved in support groups. It was suggested that the groups need to be non-judgmental; what suits one family may not be effective for another; people need to feel free to seek assistance as required, rather than being tied to an inflexible system.

Continuity is important; “support has to be there for the long haul”. “We are hurting badly and we need some answers. Where do we go? To whom? We miss this lovely daughter and need a closure, our hearts are breaking.”

#### Sydney

Six people met for a focus group in Parramatta on 12 December 2001. These people came from different areas of Sydney, and had widely differing circumstances surrounding the disappearances of their relatives. One family spoke Spanish at home; the others spoke only English. The daughter of a missing person whose remains were later found was also interviewed.

A great deal of frustration was experienced by some participants of this group. This occurred after being told to wait for twenty-four hours before making a report, and feeling that the local police were not listening, and required convincing that something was wrong. One mother felt that she would have to say she had murdered her daughter to get results.
The SOS booklet was not received by one person, who felt that she lacked essential advice, such as the importance of not putting home telephone numbers on posters. Some relatives found it stressful to be dealing with uniformed police, when there was no suggestion that it was a criminal case.

The Missing Persons Unit was found to offer more support and awareness of the families’ distress; “superb” was the word used by one relative. An area causing stress and frustration is the restriction on information caused by the Privacy Act. People are unsure of the extent of restrictions regarding access to government and institutional information, and believe sometimes that it is used as an excuse for disinclination to search old records. Relatives cited in particular the deficit of information about Coronial inquiries, and the profound need for assistance in the emotional and legal preparation for these.

Counselling, where sought, was found to be insensitive and unhelpful, with people being told; “...you must have some idea” (why a child went missing) and “...you must just learn to get on with it.” One person found that talking of her experience appeared to “...make the counsellor almost more upset than I was” and did not feel comfortable about returning to that therapist. When told by another therapist, “...you’re doing exceptionally well,” her response was “...yeah, but I’m falling apart inside, can’t you see?”

One relative stated that her way of coping was just to keep asking questions all the time, of every one: police, family, friends, and of herself. Another person said that he would “...just work like mad, then collapse”. One mother found that she could not face the day, so she slept all day and sat by the telephone all night. Other people felt they needed to be “...being seen to be doing things”, and spent time searching the streets of Sydney. The futile behaviour patterns exemplified by these families indicate that they did not receive adequate or appropriate support.

All of the families at this meeting felt that they had needed more help in the earlier stages, particularly when there had been no “upset” in the family before the disappearance.

**Coffs Harbour**

On 30 April 2002, a public meeting was held at Coffs Harbour. Although a number of local organisations were notified ten days in advance, no representatives attended. For all practical purposes this meeting was a focus group, with six relatives of missing persons attending. It was held at 2.00pm, as several people attending drove for hours to reach Coffs Harbour, one coming from Queensland. While the families involved in this meeting originally came from this area, some have since moved and one of the missing people was from Sydney.

The greatest difficulty faced by the participants in this group was that of being referred to services and support groups in Sydney; a ten hour drive away. The experience was found to be “...extremely painful, frustrating and at times hopeless”. Again the problem of suitable counselling arose, with one mother reporting the advice: “you just need to take a holiday.” Families want to speak to an advisor, who will not only listen, but will aid them in suggesting avenues of relief and methods of carrying out further searches. Some relatives felt that they had been excluded from initial involvement, either from the best of intentions, or unintentionally, and are still struggling with related issues.

Frustrations with the difficulties of gaining access to information are also wide spread. There were also some problems experienced by relatives waiting to be called back by police with access to the files. It was suggested that an officer not necessarily “on the case,” but with access to the files, could pass on messages to the case officer. That officer could also return calls to the family, rather than necessitating their depending on a return call, which can be subject to delay. These comments referred mainly to difficulties when making the initial report, but also to calls not returned by the Unit.

A number of suggestions were made at this meeting. They included a resource list for support groups, (which is now available in the SOS booklet, though none of this group had received it, as their cases predate the booklet) and a national contact register, so that families, particularly in regional and rural areas could support each other. Other suggestions included greater involvement from allied organisations for input of ideas and support groups, more services and meetings on the north coast and in rural areas generally, and a suggestion for sponsoring a missing person (“Hey! they sponsor animals!”) to cover costs for searches, interpreters, and other extra costs.

The people at this meeting stressed that regardless of the type of services established in the future, it is vital that they be provided on a national level.
Wollongong

As with the Coffs Harbour meeting, this was planned as a public meeting for 12 June 2002, at 7.00pm. Publicity during the lead up to the meeting was more intense, with a media release, radio publicity the day before the meeting and a mention on local television. Again none of the organisations was present at the meeting, and only two family members of the ten who were contacted attended the evening, as well as a member of the Missing Persons Committee of NSW Inc. and a partner of a missing person.

The relatives attending this meeting had experienced difficulties when making the initial report to the police. One was told to take the photo home and bring it back to make a report 48 hours later, “...because it takes 40 minutes to take the details of every person reported missing and in the real world it just isn’t possible to do this and have people turn up 24-48 hours later; it’s not worth it, the time could be better spent.” She was also told that a search could be started after two weeks and not to worry, “...nothing ever happens to 17 year-olds.”

It was three weeks before she received a list of support organisations. The first contact number on the list was connected to Link-up, which was not an appropriate referral in this circumstance. The SOS booklet was received later. What the family needed most this stage was assistance and direction for their searching, such as suggestions for contacts in Sydney, for example the Wayside Chapel.

Difficulties were also encountered in trying to contact refuges and drop-in centres, after possible sightings in Victoria and South Australia. A national hotline would have been very helpful. “We don’t want a support group, we want to find him. We want to be told; ‘go here, do this, look there.’”

More recently, counselling and support has been sought through Compassionate Friends. This organisation for parents of deceased children has been of some benefit, but cannot encompass all the issues faced by a parent whose child is missing - “I kept myself together too tightly and now I’m going to unravel.”

Wayside Chapel

At 3pm on 12 June 2002 a meeting for young people, 21 and under, was held at the Wayside chapel, with free food and hot drinks available. Only three young people were present to be interviewed. Of these, one person was again in contact with her family and had heard of Kids help line.

Another was 19 and had heard of Kids Help Line but not the message home register, which he said he would have used if still eighteen. The third girl was over 18 and extremely anxious about confidentiality. She wanted to be in contact with her sister, who had come to Kings Cross to find her, and thought that she would have used the message home register, if she had known about it. Part of the way through this interview her older, very defensive and slightly aggressive boyfriend entered, advising her not to say anything.

The respondent who completed the youth questionnaire was aged between 18 and 21 and had heard of Kids Help Line, but not the Message Home Register.

All the people interviewed were most apprehensive about talking to someone whom they did not know, and required repeated reassurances from youth workers familiar to them.

Phase III: Self-completion questionnaires

Of 114 questionnaires posted to 106 families, 65 were replies were received (57% response rate). Four were returned owing to change of address. This unusually high response rate to the questionnaires indicates the significance of the issues to the selected population.

Twelve questionnaires were received through the Salvation Army. Questions 1 to 8 were designed to present a general overview of the respondents and their missing relatives.
Questions 1 to 8: General overview of sample population

**Question 1 - The range of home postcodes**
Responses to this section of the questionnaire demonstrated that the respondents completing the questionnaire are spread throughout metropolitan, regional and rural New South Wales. Nineteen respondents did not enter postcodes.

![Figure 1 - Range of postcodes](image1)

**Question 2 - The length of time a relative has been missing**
People have most commonly been missing for either 5-10 years or for 20-30 years. Three people are searching for relatives missing for 60 years or more, the longest time being 74 years.

![Figure 2 - Length of time missing](image2)

**Question 3 - Gender of missing person**
Number of male missing persons ................................................................. 47 (61%)
Number of female missing persons ......................................................... 30 (39%)
**Question 4 - Age/gender of person at the time of going missing**

There are a higher percentage of males than females in this population of missing persons. The age range with the greatest number of missing persons for males and females is 18-24 years, followed by 25-39 years. The lowest age range differs; under 18 for males and 55-64 for females.

![Figure 3 - Gender and age of missing persons](chart.png)

**Question 5 - Relationship of the missing person to the respondent**

More than half (53%) of the respondents were parents of missing children, most (91%) were immediate family.

![Figure 4 - Relationship of missing person to respondent](chart.png)

**Question 6 - Is the missing person Aboriginal or a Torres Strait Islander?**

Yes .................................................................................................................................................................................................................. 1

No ................................................................................................................................................................................................................ 74

Number not answered ............................................................................................................................................................................. 2
Question 7 - Numbers of families speaking languages other than English at home:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dutch</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greek</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungarian</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandarin</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maori</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polish</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(out of 76)

Question 8 - What do you believe to be their reason for leaving/missing?

Other reasons included financial difficulties, gambling problems, substance abuse, stress and a physical health problem. In some cases where families are unsure of the reason for the disappearance, undiagnosed mental illness, or substance abuse may be present.

![Figure 5 - Suspected reason for disappearance](image)

Questions 9 to 13: Resources utilised and required and their efficacy

Questions 9 to 13 focus on the services and resources available and utilised. Respondents frequently listed more than one organisation for questions 9 to 12.

Question 9 - Who did you contact when the person went missing?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contacted</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Police</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salvation Army</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends or colleagues of the missing person</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other family members, particularly those living far away</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not the family members initiating the search</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private investigator</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contacted the local police</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schizophrenia Fellowship</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Known drug-using friends</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No one</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Question 10 - What other resources have you already used?

Print media ............................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................... 47
Television ......................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................... 31
Salvation Army ................................................................................................................................................................................................................................. 24
Leaflets/posters ......................................................................................................................................................................................................................... 10
Radio ....................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................... 10
Nothing used ................................................................................................................................................................................................................................. 8
Electoral Office / Government departments ................................................................................................................................................................. 6
Women's refuges / soup kitchens .................................................................................................................................................................................. 5
Church ............................................................................................................................................................................................................................................. 4
Internet ............................................................................................................................................................................................................................................. 2
Guardianship Board ........................................................................................................................................................................................................ 2
Counselling ............................................................................................................................................................................................................................ 1
Legal Aid ..................................................................................................................................................................................................................................... 1
ISS ............................................................................................................................................................................................................................................... 1

Question 11 - What other resources would you have liked to use or have access to?

Fifteen people expressed their frustration at lack of access to information as a result of the Privacy Act. An interest in greater media coverage was expressed, as was uncertainty of available resources.

Question 12 - What has been the most helpful service?

Police ......................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................... 26
Salvation Army ................................................................................................................................................................................................................................. 10
Family & Friends of Missing Persons .......................................................................................................................................................................... 5
Media ............................................................................................................................................................................................................................................. 1
Wayside Chapel .................................................................................................................................................................................................................... 1
Private Investigator ........................................................................................................................................................................................................ 1
Family & Friends of Missing Persons .......................................................................................................................................................................... 5
**Question 12a - What could have been most helpful?**

- More media .......................................................................................................................... 1
- Access to information / counselling .................................................................................... 5
- Search assistance .................................................................................................................. 5
- Private Investigator ............................................................................................................. 1

**Question 13 - How were you personally involved/included in the process?**

While most respondents mentioned staying in contact with the police, 15 stated that they had not been involved – two because they lived interstate and one who lived in a remote rural area of NSW. Ten people mentioned undertaking extensive searches while eight relatives referred to active involvement with the media.

**Questions 14 to 18: Assessment of reactions to a range of different support groups**

**Question 14 - How could you have been assisted more efficiently?**

- Thirteen relatives stated that more frequent contact with police or case updates would have been helpful, even if there were no new information.
- Twelve respondents would have been assisted by talking to someone who could offer search advice and/or counselling services.
- Six relatives found that the police had been most helpful and they did not think anything more could be done.
- Five people found that a faster response and also a more sympathetic approach from local police would have been appreciated.
- Two family members suggested a package, which sounds similar to the SOS booklet, not available at the time of their relatives’ disappearance. Other comments suggest greater media publicity and assistance with legal issues.

**Question 15 - Would it have helped to have contact with people in similar circumstances?**

- Yes .................................................................................................................................... 45 (58%)
- No ..................................................................................................................................... 26 (34%)
- Unsure ............................................................................................................................... 3 (4%)
- No response ...................................................................................................................... 3 (4%)

**Question 16 - Would you attend a support group if one were available?**

- Yes ................................................................................................................................... 40 (52%)
- No .................................................................................................................................... 29 (38%)
- Unsure ............................................................................................................................... 3 (4%)
- No response ...................................................................................................................... 3 (4%)

**Question 17 - How useful were the following contacts? (rated on a scale of 1-5)**

- Close friends: provided the highest level of support and were also the most frequently used support network, with 62 people relying on friends
- Counsellors: were found to be the least helpful when contacted, with 30 relatives seeking counselling.
- Support Groups: have been recorded as more helpful than counsellors but also poorly accessed, with 30 people attending support groups.
- Ministers: after close friends, provided more support for families than counsellors or support groups and were more frequently involved, with 37 respondents gaining assistance from this source.
Question 18 - Which of the following would you find helpful and/or join?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of support service respondents would access if available</th>
<th>Yes (%)</th>
<th>No (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Support groups of people sharing experiences of missing persons</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information and education sessions convened by a professional</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informal “drop in” groups</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telephone network</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-mail/ chat room</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Where percentage does not total 100, this represents nil response, or unsure.

Other suggestions included discussions with detectives to know if any further investigation will be possible and for rewards to be upgraded and posted.

This suggests that the services most required by family and friends of missing persons are information/education sessions with professionals (such as police legal experts, mental health professionals and grief counsellors) and support groups of families in similar circumstances.

Question 19 - Additional Comments

A number of relatives expressed thanks to the Salvation Army, the Reverend Bill Crewes, the Wayside Chapel and the “angels” at the Missing Persons Unit.

Some respondents proposed a nationally accessible database of resources, one person suggesting that this could be linked with religious organisations prepared to assist with support services.

People also expressed their frustration over past experiences with police and services, which were not available or were limited.

Nine relatives believed that there was a need for support groups, counselling or advice on legal matters and case follow-up, but that it was too late for them to benefit from services now.

Responses included “...being able to be referred to community organisations and help with the area of grieving and loss would be a wonderful support and benefit. I lived in a fairly isolated area and it was unbelievably difficult to adjust and accept my sister's disappearance, coping with the shock that left me numb with grief for a year, until I had to tell myself to put it behind me. One has to reach a certain acceptance over the years, but it is very difficult, and you never ‘get over’ a missing loved one. It is important to know that whatever possible is done to try and find the missing person, and that families can find some comfort and support from people who understand.”

“At the time my son disappeared I might have welcomed some counselling but after all this time I have come to terms with what I want to come to terms with. To have counselling at this stage would add a note of finality, which I would not want to accept, as I still hope and pray that one day he will come home. I suppose I am saying that counselling with people in similar circumstances would be advantageous if given as soon as possible and followed up at regular times.”

This reply generally summarises many of the responses received. However the expressed attitude to counselling, with particular reference to the time factor, poses profound questions about the nature of counselling desired. To be advised to accept the concept of probable death of the missing person may be, for some people, a more damagingly negative reaction, whereas for others it may facilitate a more calm engagement with reality. There is obviously a need for extensive research in this area.
As a result of the study it became apparent that support was needed for the families of missing persons, from an earlier stage. A variety of support modalities have been suggested, including support groups, teleconferencing, information sessions, and services of hope and remembrance.

Support groups could be developed in conjunction with existing networks, and operate in a similar way. Relevant networks have been established by organisations such as the Mental Health Association, Carers’ Association and Alzheimer’s Association. It is of the utmost importance to ensure that leaders and facilitators of groups do not become burnt out, as they are expected to be in a long term position. At the same time, family members may need to make time for themselves and for their own needs. They must not feel that the group becomes an inescapable burden. It may help to reduce this risk by ensuring that there are two facilitators rather than one. Training for people in this role needs to involve topics such as conducting group meetings and group dynamics, taking a sensitive approach to others’ distress and learning about relevant issues which may arise, in order to reduce burn out.

Teleconferencing is an integral part of many support groups, as it has advantages for use in rural areas, for people with disabilities, and as a useful tool for guest speakers from around Australia. It may also be employed by established support groups. Teleconferencing could be used in three ways: for training facilitators, for support groups and for information sessions. Ideally these would be held for a maximum of one hour, with no more than eight people. Genesys provide a range of different services including a 60 minute, operator-assisted, intrastate conference link for $28.60 or a local link for $14.74. Different types of links and packages mean that fee structures may vary according to the services required. Information sessions with a speaker could be followed by discussion amongst families, supported by a facilitator. In rural areas it would be important to have a local contact to support group facilitators and assist with any appropriate referrals.

There are, however certain constraints with teleconferencing. The affordability of a series of teleconferences may not be possible for some families; subsidies may be required. As well as the issue of funding, there is the difficulty of finding and training enough suitable facilitators (for both support groups or teleconferences). Finding local contacts in rural and regional areas would depend on the size of the community and the services available. Teleconferencing is generally used for a single or series of conferences; for example, six weekly sessions. This may suit some people and would ensure that facilitators were not burnt out, however, some families need a more constant and long term support network.

Information seminars were the most frequently requested form of support, with 60 per cent of respondents indicating an interest in this type of support. These could also occur in conjunction with existing organisations. It is important that these be directed and focused by the families who are needing information or assistance in a certain area. It may be possible to organise a number of regional meetings. The information collected, as well as anecdotal data, suggests that for many people, personal contact is extremely important; informal, social events were suggested by some families. Church services of hope and remembrance provide valuable opportunities for families to meet and talk. These now take place in Sydney, Cardiff and Coffs Harbour.

Support services, requested by a large percentage of the respondents, are clearly a feasible proposition. Information gathered from the postcode data suggests that meetings could be held in metropolitan, western and northern Sydney. The southern Sydney and southern coast areas may wish to combine. Teleconferencing could be incorporated in the establishing of these support groups. It has the potential to be of great benefit to people in rural regions, as a telephone network appears to be almost twice as likely to be used as the internet. This would have to be assisted by external funding or subsidies; however, it remains one of the most cost effective means of supporting families over a large geographical area.

Providing a support network flexible enough to allow different people to take a leadership role, yet structured enough for this to occur smoothly over a long period of time, remains a challenge. Linking in with organisations which have been running support groups and training facilitators for a number of years, may be helpful. Affordability for support groups is also relevant to their sustainability. The costs may be quite low initially, (such as stationery and possibly weekly cost of a venue), although, it is important that these are shared equally and not just passed on to the facilitators. In this way, support groups should be financially sustainable. Families and friends in metropolitan and regional centres could benefit from long term support of this nature.
CONCLUSIONS

A number of concerns were discussed during the interviews conducted with representatives from various organisations. The main factors affecting tracing agencies and the community organisations are the limitations of access to information imposed by the Privacy Act, and the lack of suitably trained health professionals.

Some organisations are finding the definition of “missing” to be problematic and are cautious about over-identifying with victims of crime.

Support needs for families as a whole, and support after a family has been united are also areas that would benefit from further research.

Focus groups with people from various areas of NSW demonstrate the intensity of suffering which people are experiencing. People in regional and rural areas most vehemently expressed their frustration, anger and at times, a sense of hopelessness.

The contact with young people at the Wayside Chapel and on the streets demonstrated their extreme wariness of providing personal information to unfamiliar people. Further research would best be carried out with or by youth workers who have a rapport and by means other than a written questionnaire.

The results of questions one to eight provide a general overview of the respondents. Although some responses were referred through the Salvation Army Tracing Service, most came from the NSW Police Missing Persons Unit, which may partially explain why such a high proportion of this sample are missing in suspicious circumstances. The relatives of these long-term missing people are, perhaps more likely to have maintained police contact over time and to become involved with police community programmes. While a relatively small proportion of the sample came from non-English speaking backgrounds, this is in line with the findings of the Henderson and Henderson, (1998, p.9).

Questions nine to 14 consider the services and resources used and requested. The most widely used resources are the media, particularly printed media and television for publicity. The service most requested by respondents is access to information from government departments, which is not accessible under the Privacy Act. This has been a cause of frustration for tracing agencies as well as private individuals.

More publicity from media and public displays of posters are requested, along with support groups, counselling, and legal advice. Many people are unsure about services available to them. Some respondents expressed an interest in using private investigators and were discouraged from using them (the one person who did consult one was “shocked by their standards”).

The two main methods by which people felt they could have been more efficiently assisted were, firstly, the more frequent receipt of information on the progress of their relative’s case, and secondly, search advice and counselling.

Respondents’ reactions to a range of different support group options were noted in questions 15 to 18. Fifty-eight per cent of relatives believed that having contact with people in similar circumstances would have been helpful, with 52 per cent stating that they would join a support group, if it were available.

The most helpful contacts for relatives have been close friends. Respondents reacted most favourably to the suggestion of information and education sessions convened by a professional and then support groups. E-mail chat rooms appeared the least popular. This may be a result of concern for confidentiality and the lack of personal contact.

Inappropriate and insensitive counselling appears to be disturbingly wide spread. What many relatives sought most urgently in the early stages of the disappearance was practical advice on where and how to be involved in the search for the missing person. People were still being advised, as recently as 20 months ago, that they had to wait for 48 hours before a report could be made and that to organise a search would take two weeks. It was recommended that a professional support coordinator, (as opposed to a volunteer) would be able to provide and coordinate a range of services, including regular contact about case developments.
RECOMMENDATIONS

The scope of this report does not include availability and allocation of current or future funding. It is to be hoped that the recommendations of this report may be useful in targeting or prioritising service needs in the future.

In line with Henderson and Henderson, (1998), this report recommends support services provided on a national level, services in the form of practical advice and appropriate counselling, and further research.

- The most important services to establish are support groups for people in similar situations, and opportunities for people to speak to various professionals with experience in issues concerning with missing persons.
- A full-time support coordinator could liaise between police, government, non-government, religious and community organisations. This appointment would also provide continuity while establishing support services.
- Provision of support services for families in regional, rural or interstate areas would be facilitated by the creation of a national contact register. This could be done by expanding the existing support services, including the twenty-four hour help line and website.
- There is a need for continual updating education for police in local stations with regard to the prompt initiation of missing persons reports and distribution of the SOS booklet.
- An urgent need exists for counsellors to be trained in the management of unresolved grief and loss with associated with the disappearance of a relative or friend. Counsellors working in this field also need an understanding of the way in which the Guardianship Board, government departments, state legislation, the Federal Privacy Act, Coroner’s inquiries, legal issues and the media affect the lives of those searching for missing people. In addition, a practical approach to providing search advice is essential.

Further research is paramount for a comprehensive and effective understanding of the needs of people whose lives have been changed by the inexplicable absence of a family member or friend, and the practicalities of providing for their needs.

FURTHER READING


Henderson P & Henderson M (Dr.) 1998, *Missing People – Issue for the Australian Community*, independent study commissioned by the National Missing Persons Unit, Canberra


Lincoln, R & Wilson, P 1994, ‘Media coverage of missing persons: Help or hindrance?’ *Australian Journalism Review*, 16 (2): 103-115, July-December.

Victorian Government 1998, *Wandering behaviour in dementia*, edited by the Community and Professional Education Team; Aged, Community and Mental Health Division, Melbourne.
Families & Friends of Missing Persons - Research Questionnaire

Date: .......... / .......... / ..........

This information is for research purposes only. Complete confidentiality is assured and no individual records will be retained.

1. “Home” postcode of missing person .................................................................................................................................

2. Length of time missing .................................................................................................................................................................

3. Gender (please tick selection)
   □ male    □ female

4. Age (please tick selection)
   □ <18    □ 18 - 24    □ 25 - 39    □ 40 - 54    □ 55 - 64    □ 65+

5. What is their relationship to you? .................................................................................................................................................

6. Is the missing person Aboriginal or a Torres Strait Islander? (please tick selection)
   □ yes    □ no

7. Language spoken at home (if other than English)? ...............................................................................................................

8. What do you believe to be their reason for disappearing?
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9. Who did you contact when the person went missing?
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10. What other resource (for example, media and other agencies) have you already used?
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11. What other resources would you have liked to use or have access to?

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12. What has been/would have been the most helpful service?

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13. How were you personally involved/included in the process?

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14. How did you feel that you could have been assisted more effectively?

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15. Would it have helped to have contact with people in similar circumstances? (please tick selection)

☐ yes ☐ no

16. Would you attend a support group if one were available? (please tick selection)

☐ yes ☐ no

17. On a scale of 1 to 5, rate how useful the following contacts were? (please tick selection)

(1 not helpful / 2 of little help / 3 of some help / 4 definitely helpful / 5 very helpful)

Close friends ☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐ 6
Counsellor ☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐ 6
Support group ☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐ 6
Minister ☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐ 6
Other (please comment).............................................................................................................................................
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18. Which of the following would you find helpful and/or would you join?

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<tr>
<th>Model of support group</th>
<th>Would you join?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Support groups of people sharing experiences of missing persons</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information and education sessions convened by a professional</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informal 'drop in' groups</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telephone network</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email chat room</td>
<td>yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other (please comment)</td>
<td></td>
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19. Any other comments?

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Thank you very much for taking the time to fill in this questionnaire.
**APPENDIX 2: YOUTH QUESTIONNAIRE**

**Family and Friends of Missing Persons - Youth Questionnaire**

This information is for research purposes only. Complete confidentiality is assured and no individual records will be retained.

1. **Age (please tick selection)**
   - [ ] <12
   - [ ] 12 - 15
   - [ ] 15 - 18
   - [ ] 18 - 21
   - [ ] 21 - 24
   - [ ] 25+

2. **Gender (please tick selection)**
   - [ ] male
   - [ ] female

3. **Length of time since leaving**

4. **Have you heard of Kids Help Line? (please tick selection)**
   - [ ] yes
   - [ ] no

5. **Have you heard of Kids Help Line Message Home Register? (please tick selection)**
   - [ ] yes
   - [ ] no

6. **Are you interested in being on this register or something similar? (please tick selection)**
   - [ ] yes
   - [ ] no

7. **Would you be interested in contacting family members...**
   - On the telephone
     - [ ] yes
     - [ ] no
   - By another person on the phone
     - [ ] yes
     - [ ] no
   - In person, with a mediator
     - [ ] yes
     - [ ] no
   - No

8. **Is there any other service that you would find helpful in reuniting you with any of your family members?**

   ............................................................................................................................................................................................
   ............................................................................................................................................................................................
   ............................................................................................................................................................................................
   .............................................................................................................................................................................................
REFERENCES


Kendall, C, Clayton-Brown, B & Read, P. Link-up. ISBN 0 646 23210 X.


Support needs for families & friends of long-term missing persons


