



Justice
Families & Friends
of Missing Persons

Support options

for families and friends of missing people

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Introduction

When someone is missing, those who are left behind can experience feelings of distress, isolation and grief. Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit (FFMPU) continues to seek ways of responding to the unique support needs of families and friends of missing people, and of overcoming barriers to accessing support.

While the missing persons sector strives to develop and improve social responses, families and friends continue to look for support from and connection with others who have experienced missing. It is hoped that insight into the experiences of those seeking support will contribute to an understanding of the gaps that exist in support and options for meeting previously unidentified needs. Knowledge gained may be used to develop more accessible pathways for seeking support.

Rationale

The need for improved access to existing services and the development of new support networks is founded on recent comments from family members, and research findings (Lorang, 2002; Jacques, 2002; James, Anderson & Putt, 2008; Wicks, 2009; FFMPU, 2009; FFMPU, 2011). Wayland (2006) identified “many families of long term missing persons” are “keen to ensure other families are well supported” (p. 24). Support groups, facilitated by FFMPU, have to some extent met the need of families to provide and receive support, as have some web-based networks. However, work and family commitments, geographical isolation, distance and inadequate technology can be barriers to accessing support networks (FFMPU, 2013, p. 3).

FFMPU, as part of the NSW Department of Justice, remains the single specialist support service in Australia, employing qualified staff with specialist expertise to address the impact for loved ones affected by missing. FFMPU offers a range of services, including support, counselling, support group meetings and family forums; and also hosts a Facebook page, conducts research and produces publications addressing relevant issues.

The most recent survey into the support needs of families and friends was conducted in 2009 by FFMPU with the assistance of the National Missing Persons Coordination Centre. The current study aims to gather up-to-date information to identify what further supports families and friends want and to explore innovative ways of addressing these identified gaps.

Methodology

Questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of 13 quantitative questions and five qualitative questions. Seven questions gathered demographic data about the participants, six looked at their support experience and the final five, utilising Likert scales, asked for the participant's preference and interest in an additional support network. The questionnaire contained a section where participants could volunteer to take part in a telephone interview. To ensure that the questionnaire was accessible to participants, a hardcopy and online version were created. The online questionnaire platform, Polldaddy was used to create and host the online version questionnaire.

The questionnaire was distributed to a large sample group of participants who were identified as having a missing loved one, with attempts made to sample those that are not FFMPU service users as well as those that are. Twenty-one questionnaires were provided to participants at two FFMPU support group meetings. Sixty-seven questionnaires were mailed to a relevant selection of the FFMPU mailing list, excluding those that had little to do with the FFMPU at the time. An online version of the questionnaire was hosted on the FFMPU Facebook page.

Quantitative questionnaire data was collected from both hard copy and online questionnaires. Likert scales were analysed by assigning a value of 1-5 to each response based on the level of interest represented in the scale (1 = “not at all interested”, 2 = “slightly interested”, 3 = “moderately interested”, 4 = “very interested”, 5 = “extremely interested”). These values were combined and then averaged to obtain a simple representation of the Likert scale responses. The qualitative data was thematically analysed to draw out key themes in the data. This process was conducted by two researchers separately and then together to ensure rigour.

Focus groups

Three focus groups were held at Campbelltown, Queanbeyan and Corrimal. Postal and email invitations were sent to existing FFMPU clients who have attended or indicated they would like to attend support group meetings. The number of families invited to each group was: Campbelltown – 21; Queanbeyan – 7; and Corrimal – 9.

The Campbelltown and Corrimal groups were facilitated by the same two group leaders and audio-recorded. Each of the two group leaders transcribed one focus group each. Due to travel and technology limitations the Queanbeyan group was facilitated by a different FFMPU team member, making a written account of the discussion.

Each transcription was thematically analysed by both group leaders for rigour and credibility. From several lengthy consultations, individual analysis and emergent themes were collated from the de-identified data.

Telephone interviews

While one focus group and 16 questionnaire participants indicated an interest in being contacted to further discuss their responses, only the 14 who had supplied a telephone number were considered for a phone interview. Due to time constraints of this study, eight of the participants were randomly selected by two researchers. Six of the participants were clients of FFMPU. One researcher interviewed four questionnaire participants, and the other interviewed three questionnaire and one focus group participant. One participated in a focus group, questionnaire and telephone interview.

The aim of the interviews was to explore in greater detail the themes and concepts emerging from questionnaires and focus groups. The interviews were semi-structured, with questions addressing the benefits, limitations and structure of each of the proposed networks. There was also an opportunity for participants to make comments related to their experience and their engagement with existing services.

Both interviewers made written notes during the interview. Both interviewers separately analysed each of the interviews they had conducted. Interviewers held consultation sessions, ensuring greater rigour and credibility in the thematic analysis phase.

Findings

Questionnaire

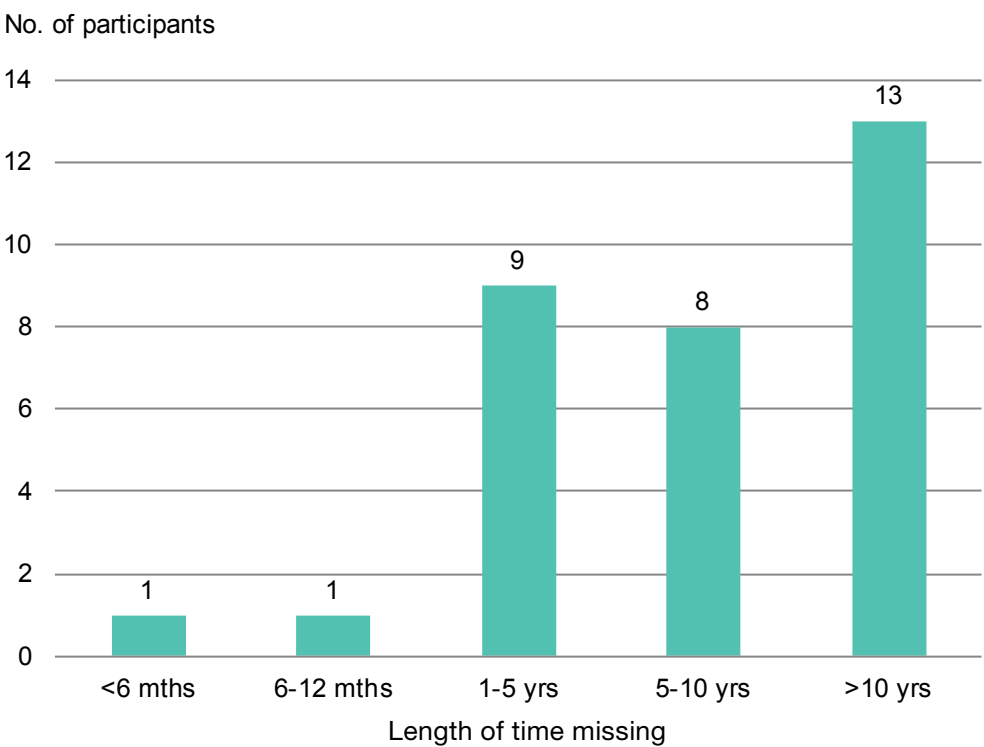
Of the 88 hard copy questionnaires distributed, 20 were completed (23% response rate). This coupled with the online questionnaire, which was completed 12 times, means a total of 32 questionnaires were collected. Due to the way the online questionnaire was hosted there is no way to calculate a response rate.

Questions 1-7: Demographic information

More than half of the participants are from NSW (n=20, 63%), with the majority of these coming from outside of Sydney (n=13, 41%). Three responses were received from Victoria, two from Melbourne and one from regional areas. One response was recorded from all other states except for South Australia where there were zero responses. Three international responses were recorded.

Almost half (41%) of the participants have had their loved one missing for more than 10 years. Two participants have had their loved one missing for less than one year.

Figure 1: Length of time missing

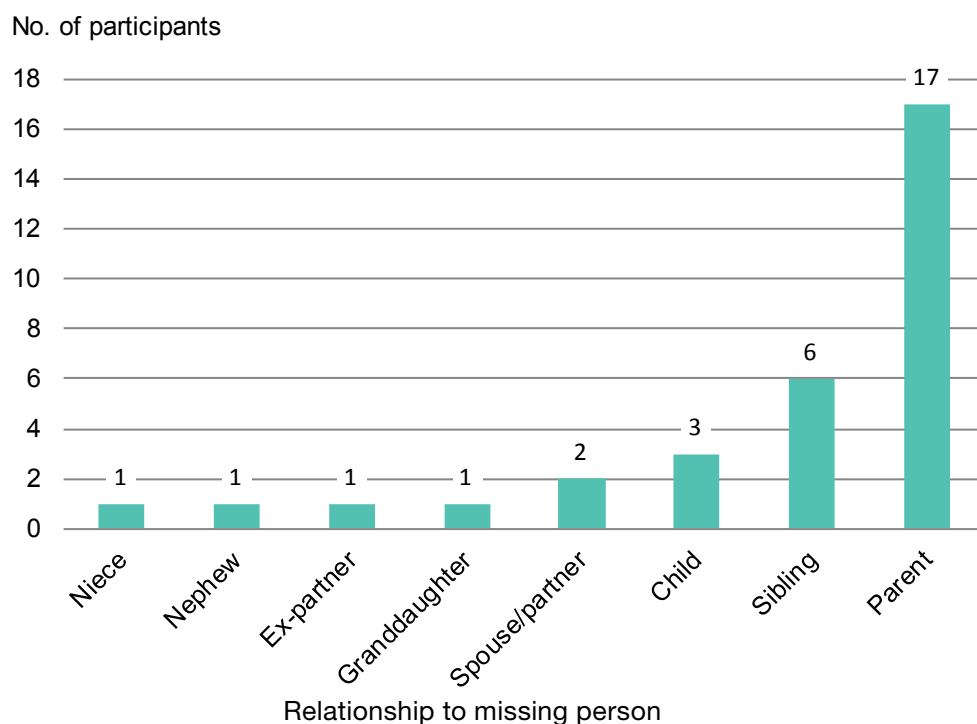


In terms of relationship to the missing person, the largest group of participants are parents of a missing person (53%) and almost all of the participants are immediate family to the missing person (88%).

Twenty-nine participants stated that they were neither Aboriginal nor Torres Strait Islander. One participant is Aboriginal whilst two participants did not answer the question.

Almost all of the participants had heard of FFMPU before taking part in the questionnaire (91%). Three participants had not, although one of these participants stated that they had accessed FFMPU for support in a later question. The most common means of finding out about FFMPU was through Police Missing Persons Unit (n=6), local police (n=4), friends and family (n=4) and the internet (n=4).

Figure 2: Relationship of participant to missing person

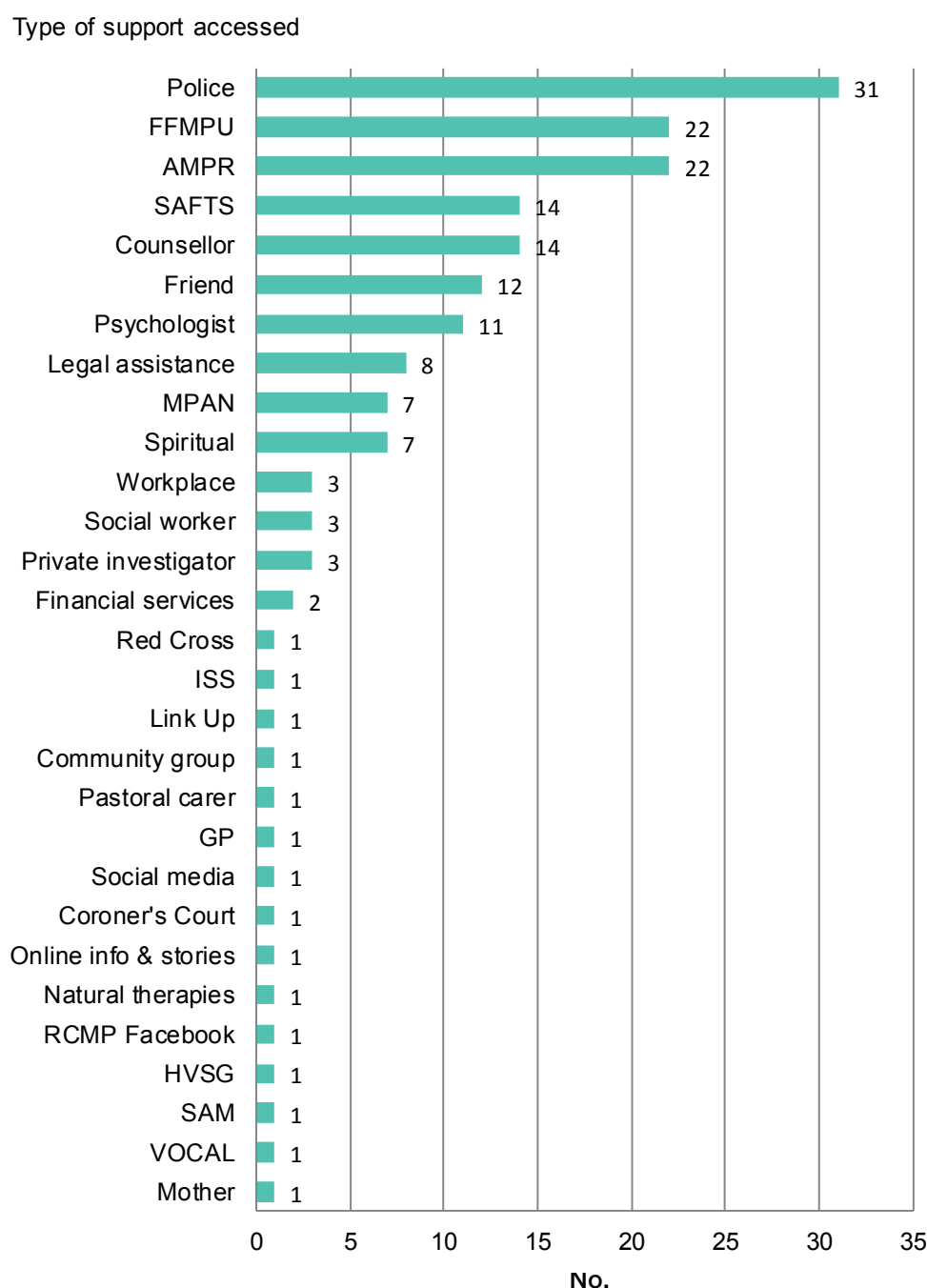


Questions 8-11: Experience of support

Almost all participants stated that they had accessed the police for support (97%), with most also accessing FFMPU (69%) and Australian Missing Persons Register (69%).

The most services accessed by an individual was 13 and the least was one, however in this case the participant was from a European country, and as such many of the options listed would not have been relevant for them. The most common number of services accessed was four and the average amount accessed per participant was 5.6.

Figure 3: Type of support accessed by participant



(FFMPU = Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit; AMPR = Australian Missing Persons Register; SAFTS = Salvation Army Family Training Service; MPAN = Missing Persons Advocacy Network; ISS = International Social Service; RCMP = Royal Canadian Mounted Police; HVSG = Homicide Victims Support Group; SAM = Support After Murder; VOCAL = Victims Of Crime Assistance League)

Although many organisations and supports were listed as being helpful, FFMPU was by far the most prominent, being noted as helpful by roughly one-third of participants. The participant's family, religious organisations and other families with missing loved ones were all mentioned several times as being helpful supports.

The importance of empathy, though not mentioned explicitly, was highlighted by many participants, often referring to an understanding of the missing experience. One participant, when asked what was helpful, stated "Being able to talk through the whole process with people who understand..." and this notion was mirrored in many other comments. Within the theme of understanding, a distinction was made by several participants between the different types of understanding that can be offered as a support. Some referred to a professional understanding of missing with several participants attributing this to FFMPU. Other participants wrote that an individual with a lived experience of missing had been a helpful support to them and this is further evidenced in the numerous mentions of the helpful support provided by other families with missing loved ones. Correspondingly, when asked what had not been helpful several participants mentioned a lack of understanding in some professionals, services and the general public.

Several participants commented on the benefit of being provided with information and advice. A few mentions were made of the specific type of information that was helpful, referring to information and advice about financial and legal assistance, and the Coroner's Court. When asked what was not helpful a participant stated that they were provided with conflicting information. Some of the gaps in current supports identified by participants were regarding a lack of information including a need for advice when dealing with the media, better access to information about compensation and more awareness of FFMPU.

Many participants indicated that counselling had been a helpful support. However, several participants mentioned problems with inappropriate counselling and others mentioned the scarcity of appropriate counselling. Participants stated that it had taken too long for them to be referred to counselling. Appropriate referrals were seen as a helpful aspect of support by a number of participants and others stated that just having the knowledge of the existence of these supports was helpful.

Many participants listed difficulties with the police in their support experience. Problems with the initial contact, a perceived inadequate response to the missing person's case, a lack of communication between police and families and no referrals for support, were all mentioned. When questioned regarding gaps in the existing supports, one participant stated that the police need to respond immediately to the concerns of the family, another two indicated that the police need to "listen better" to family members. The police were mentioned several times as being helpful supports with several specific mentions of the Missing Persons Unit.

Questions 12-17: Preference for additional support networks

The results of the first Likert Scale, looking at participant's interest in different types of support, showed that on average participants were very interested in practical support (4.1). All other types of support presented moderate levels of interest (emotional support – 3.5, social support – 3.3, information/education – 3.6, promoting positive changes for families – 3.6). The second Likert Scale, looking at interest in different types of support networks, showed very similar levels in each type of support network (telephone – 2.9, face-to-face – 3.1, online forum – 2.9). The final Likert Scale asked when participants would like to have access to a support network, finding moderate levels of interest for all three options (weekdays – 3.2, weeknights – 3.1, weekends – 3.0).

Ten (43%) participants were willing to travel for 30-60 minutes to attend face-to-face meetings, nine (39%) were willing to travel one to two hours, three (13%) would only travel less than 30 minutes and only one (4%) would travel longer than two hours. Nine participants did not answer this question. When asked who they would like to be involved in the coordination of an online forum, 20 (69%) participants named FFMPU, six (21%) identified both FFMPU and family members, whilst no participants chose just family members. Other responses listed were MPAN, “someone who has been through this” and a moderator. Three participants did not answer this question.

Focus groups

Although the aim of the focus groups was to discuss the benefits and limitations of telephone, online and face-to-face support networks, participants also made comment on existing services. This reflects a typical FFMPU support group pattern where participants often take the discussion to a different but still relevant topic. FFMPU support group numbers usually vary between 2-6 participants. A larger attendance is often indicated in client’s responses to invitations; however circumstances on the day, such as emotional and physical wellbeing and work and other commitments can result in different numbers than expected. Support groups therefore have a defined membership eligibility, however the structure is open as members can choose when to attend. Each of the three focus groups ran for an average of 100 minutes.

Campbelltown

A focus group of four people met at Campbelltown on 28 August 2015 for 45 minutes. Being the first of the focus groups, Campbelltown participants were asked to review and make comment on a self-completion questionnaire draft. From these comments changes were made to the Likert Scale format and the order of questions. Discussion was oriented around the different ways in which people like to access support, dependent on where they are on the ‘continuum’ of their personal experience of having a loved one missing, and their ability and need to access support. One participant commented that having different options for support, is like the pieces of a “jigsaw puzzle” you can start putting together to “make you feel better”. The importance of knowing support is available, and having choice and control over when and how to access different options, was also highlighted. An online or telephone network was considered a necessary option for those who are geographically isolated or distant. The psychosocial benefit to oneself in extending support to other members was also acknowledged.

The Queanbeyan and Corrimal groups focused largely on exploring the pros, cons and structure of an additional telephone, online or face-to-face support network.

Queanbeyan

A focus group of four people met at Queanbeyan on 4 September 2015. Two participants were new group members. There was an overall consensus that face-to-face meetings are preferable to telephone meetings, as there is great benefit in being able to see people’s body language and therefore interact with, and provide emotional support, to others in a face-to-face group situation. The telephone was described as being too impersonal, “like you are talking to strangers”, with concerns expressed around privacy and confidentiality. There was an emphasis on having designated volunteers/family members with an understanding and awareness of missing persons issues providing support to other group members. It was suggested that volunteers would undergo orientation and training with FFMPU.

An online forum with a discussion board format was considered to be a non-confronting way for people to search for information and receive practical support. An online network was considered to be a more accessible form of group support for those with online literacy, living in remote areas, or for younger people. Such a forum would require guidelines for appropriate use and be moderated by FFMPU.

All participants expressed dissatisfaction with investigation protocols and procedures. Suggestions for providing improved responses and support to families included: more frequent police communication with families; more flexibility around the sharing of information; a designated police liaison officer for each Local Area Command; and increasing media opportunities to raise the profile of missing persons and greater community awareness.

Corrimal

Two people met for a focus group at Corrimal on 18 September 2015. Both members expressed a personal preference for attending face-to-face support groups in their existing format, however one has also been involved in separate telephone meetings with two other FFMPU clients, one of which was a mutual support arrangement. “Seeing” people was considered by one person as important in establishing trust; however they acknowledged they had been able to connect with others over the phone. Talking in groups was mentioned as difficult for some.

A telephone network was seen as overcoming distance barriers and hesitation to attend group meetings. The FFMPU team was considered necessary to coordinate the “match” of network members from different families according to their circumstances, and provide guidance on appropriate use of the network. Both the caller and receiver of the call would need to consent to the suitability of the timing of the call. With concerns around the onus of responsibility in one-on-one conversations being raised, a reciprocal support arrangement was preferred over a designated support person providing information and advice.

Overall, the online support network was a preferred additional option for reasons of accessibility and availability for existing FFMPU clients and opening “up the field” to new members, who may be isolated; limited resources in providing face-to-face groups; and a shared sense of group responsibility and benefit for members of the network. Hacking, privacy and confidentiality were seen to be addressed by members being required to register with FFMPU, who would also oversee the forum and provide guidelines for appropriate use.

FFMPU was considered as crucial in providing leadership, stability and constancy in facilitating groups, and in collating and disseminating helpful information that is shared in groups to inform and support others, including other families and service providers. The focus group considered this could only be achieved in group situations where FFMPU was privy to group discussions. Participants were concerned this capacity would be lost in a telephone network or face-to-face meetings taking place without FFMPU’s presence.

The psychosocial benefits of having opportunities to share with others who have a missing loved one were expressed in all three groups. Hearing of others’ personal experiences helps to validate and normalise people’s emotions, cognitions and behaviour. Interacting with others in similar circumstances provides a level of empathy and understanding beyond what professionals and the general community can.

Telephone interviews

The average interview time across eight participants was 45 minutes, with 30 minutes being the median. Interview time varied according to participant's availability and level of interest in each of the three different options.

Linking families and friends who have a missing loved one directly with each other, outside of existing support group meetings and FFMPU events was considered a valuable option for support that would augment existing FFMPU services. Participants acknowledged that "to be able to connect with others" with a "shared human experience" provides opportunities for gaining and providing support outside their own immediate circle. Sharing with others in similar circumstances who also have some emotional distance from your personal situation, helps to reduce the sense of burdening those close to you and lessens the risk of "compassion fatigue".

In all networks FFMPU was considered to be a necessary "gatekeeper" either to group membership and/or the content of group discussion, playing a role in assessing the suitability of potential members, and moderating group conversations. None of the three proposed networks was a clear favourite. People had no distinct preference, preferring face-to-face or online, face-to-face or telephone, or online only.

Both online and face-to-face networks were described as providing benefits of group support, such as a shared sense of group responsibility for each other, the conversation, information, ideas and a shared understanding that would validate and normalise people's experiences.

Face-to-face support was considered to provide a superior level of empathy and emotional support, over the other options. Concerns over whether empathy could be conveyed in writing were expressed. Being able to see others was also important in building rapport and trust and being open with others. However, face-to-face was also seen as being difficult to engage with for those who are geographically isolated, or for those people in the early stages, and others who may find being with, and hearing the experiences of others too emotionally challenging. Although mutual support was preferred, one person suggested that a designated leader would need training in group management and another person recommended that all group members should undergo some training, such as accidental counselling. One of these participants also acknowledged that existing support group members had learnt to display sensitive and respectful behaviour toward each other, modelled on FFMPU group leader examples. Interviewees considered a neutral public setting with some level of privacy to be a safe environment in which people would be able to contain their emotions.

Face-to-face or telephone options were preferred by some as they were seen to provide some advantages over an online forum. The main issue with the latter was around privacy and confidentiality. Online was seen as too impersonal, yet telephone support was also considered as less personal than face-to-face support, presenting issues of trust and rapport building. Face-to-face or telephone options provided compartmentalised networks, as opposed to an online forum that would be ever-present. These participants were concerned they may become too dependent on such a network. This level of availability and access however, was described by most interviewees as one of the main benefits of an online network. (These issues will be further discussed in the online section.)

Telephone or online networks were preferred because they overcame some of the barriers to accessing support such as geographical distance, mobility issues and the emotional intensity of face-to-face groups. A level of emotional distance was considered as important in "settling emotions". Both options also provide a level of invisibility to others, where participants are less likely to feel judged by their appearance.

The telephone network was seen by most as being a non-professional reciprocal support option, although some participants viewed themselves in the role of a support person given their knowledge and experience within the missing persons sector. Guidelines on the use of the network would ask that people respect others' boundaries, with both caller and receiver agreeing on a time when they were ready for the conversation to proceed. People could either text or call back at a better time, or make a call to another group member.

The online network was recognised as offering more flexibility, choice and control than either of the other networks. Online was also considered as being the most available as well as the most accessible option. The online forum was seen as being available 24 hours a day to a private/closed group of verified members registered with FFMPU. Online participants could choose when, how, for how long and where they could participate. Most interviewees considered anonymity desirable, however some were concerned this may result in unsafe or disrespectful use. Although some people had privacy, confidentiality and trust concerns, it was acknowledged that having the flexibility to be an observer of the conversation or an active contributor allowed members time to familiarise themselves with the forum and other members, and build a sense of confidence and trust. FFMPU was seen as the most suitable moderator of the forum, overseeing safe respectful use of the site. Topics or questions could be posted either by members or FFMPU and available to all members to observe or make comment. Having a record of conversations was seen as a convenient reference for users. One participant expressed a wish to be able to also have one-on-one conversations. It was also suggested that members would be required to agree to Conditions of Use with regard to confidentiality, respect and sensitivity.

Comments made by interviewees on existing services were centred on dissatisfaction with the police investigation, the coronial and legal processes and procedures, as well as inadequate emotional support and lack of referrals from doctors.

Key themes emerging from the research include: choice, control and flexibility; a sense of shared understanding, knowledge, experiences, empathy and responsibility; trust; and a need for FFMPU involvement.

Discussion

The response rate (22%) to the questionnaire is similar to that received in the 2009 FFMPU study (19%). The 2002 FFMPU study received a significantly higher response rate (57%), which may be attributed to the unaddressed issues being faced by those living with missing at the time. Thirteen years later, with the establishment and increased awareness of FFMPU, the needs of families and friends of missing people may feel more recognised than they were in 2002, and as such some may see less of a need for this type of study.

Almost two-thirds (n=20) of the survey responses came from current FFMPU clients, and as such, some of the results may be skewed towards this group. This can be seen in the strong representation from NSW (63%) in the responses, as NSW is where the majority of FFMPU clients reside. The bias is also evident in the percentage of participants who had heard of FFMPU before receiving the survey (91%).

Support experience

Given the nature of the missing experience, the fact that almost all (97%) participants had contact with the police is expected.

The theme of ‘understanding’ from other individuals, as a helpful aspect of support is prominent in the survey responses, the focus groups and interviews. Participants identified understanding helpful for several reasons. Firstly, a shared understanding may help to normalise the impact of missing for the individual. It may also help to lessen feelings of disenfranchised grief that are often experienced by those living with missing (FFMPU 2014a, p. 34). One participant stated that there was a benefit in not having to explain their situation when speaking to FFMPU.

The knowledge of how to deal with the practical and psychological impacts of the experience of living with missing is not widely understood. It is therefore unsurprising that participants identified being provided information and advice as helpful. The practical aspects of the missing experience, including dealing with financial issues (FFMPU 2014a, p. 15) or coronial processes (FFMPU 2014b, p. 8), can be confusing and add to feelings of distress; therefore information and advice that demystifies this, may be helpful for families.

Many participants reported difficulties in their dealings with police, identifying communication difficulties as the most prominent: feeling they were not listened to nor kept informed with regard to the investigation were two recurring concerns. These same concerns were expressed in the 2002 study (FFMPU, pp. 7-8). This does not necessarily indicate that communication with police has not improved since 2002, as some of the participants may have contributed to both studies. One focus group participant indicated that their experience with the police had improved greatly over the last decade.

Face-to-face

Face-to-face groups were seen as conducive to sharing empathy, building rapport and trust, and a sense of shared responsibility for each other and for ideas, conversation and internal group knowledge.

Following the Wicks report of 2009 on groupwork, FFMPU has facilitated face-to-face support groups for those living in Newcastle, Sydney, Queanbeyan, and Wollongong regions; currently in the latter three. Group members, who also participated in focus group sessions, are therefore familiar with group processes, and acknowledge the guiding role of FFMPU in group maintenance and the development of group members’ skills. The positive experiences of existing support group members may therefore be associated with their personal wishes to see the development of a similar additional network through which others could also enjoy mutual support. However, given the finite resources of FFMPU, additional support groups in these and other regional areas would require a voluntary leader with the experience and understanding of having a missing loved one. Given people’s willingness to travel between 30 minutes to an hour, and some two hours, members could be drawn from within this radius.

Prior experience in interpersonal processes has been identified as a factor in the transition from a professionally facilitated group to a successful and cohesive peer-led mutual support group (Viverto et al. 2014, p. 593). Existing groups may therefore transition well to forming additional peer-support groups should a family member volunteer as group leader. The establishment of “non-experienced” groups would also be dependent on the preparedness of someone to volunteer as a peer-leader, and of members identifying with a need to undergo groupwork training and facilitation. Examples of volunteer led groups are the anxiety support groups, coordinated by the Mental Health Association

of NSW, where people with anxiety disorders and their families and friends come together to share experiences and information in a safe, friendly environment (Mental Health Association 2015). Another face-to-face option would be for two people to meet half way in a neutral public place, nullifying the need for a leader.

FFMPU could play a role in linking people together, enabling families and friends to have other face-to-face opportunities. However, without the presence of FFMPU, the conduit for sharing the knowledge created in these groups with other clients, service providers and the general community would be lost. Face-to-face groups also do not provide the choice, control and flexibility of other networks. Developing another face-to-face network may duplicate services already available to those who have access to support. Given the mutual benefits of connecting people with other families, FFMPU has an interest in extending such opportunities to those who currently have limited access due to geographic isolation, mobility challenges, work and other commitments and a reluctance to attend groups. These barriers as well as the readiness and suitability of clients would potentially limit the size of groups.

Telephone

A telephone network overcomes many of the barriers of face-to-face meetings. It was also seen as an option offering greater choice, control and flexibility around when to access support. Although some suggested the lack of visual cues might prompt confidentiality and trust concerns; for others, telephone conversations appeal for reasons of relative privacy, the feeling of anonymity, and reduced emotional intensity associated with being invisible. No visual awareness of people's physical traits or ability, race, and socio-economic status can equalise participants and engender an active listening, allowing for a "fluid exchange of ideas" (Grumet & Evans in Wicks 2009, p. 8, and Cecil 2014, p. 139).

Telephone conferencing, facilitated by FFMPU counsellors, has been presented as an option in past research (Lorang 2002, Wicks 2009), but not implemented, perhaps due to the technical and cost challenges. Telephone conversations between clients have been facilitated by FFMPU, linking one person with another who can offer the empathy, emotional and practical support that comes from having been through a similar experience. These 'telephone relationships' may have been a one-off or more frequent occurrence. Although both parties reported mutual benefit, these 'telephone relationships' did not continue.

Another suggestion of a rostered support person raises concerns around the onus of responsibility this would impose on one person. A mutual support framework would be better facilitated through a "telephone tree" of group members, linked through FFMPU. Guidelines for use would acknowledge respect for people's choice to opt in/out of a phone conversation, and provide callers the option of calling another "tree" member. Although support would be mutual, a feeling of responsibility for the other person would not be shared as it is within a group, with the benefits and challenges of the conversation remaining with the two parties. Team Hope, is an example of a USA telephone support network run by carefully screened volunteers, providing one-on-one peer support for the families and friends of missing children and supplementing the professional intervention of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children in the USA (NCEMC 2015).

Online forum

An online forum is the most accessible of the proposed support networks, available to anyone with an internet connection. Furthermore it is asynchronous, meaning that individuals can access it when it is convenient for them. A forum also allows for members to read archival posts and messages for helpful advice, and places control in the hands of its users. Being able to consider any response, without

pressure to immediately respond, allows for deeper reflection and control of emotions. Users are also able to 'get away' from the group if, for example, they find a topic emotional or distressing, giving them control over when and how deeply they engage in the discussion (Barak, Beniel-Nissim & Suler 2008, p. 1871).

Anonymity and invisibility may also lead to the disinhibition of group members, potentially leading to greater self-disclosure and willingness to join the group. However, disinhibition can lead to negative occurrences, such as rude or harsh language (Barak, Beniel-Nissim & Suler 2008, p. 1871). The issues of safety and respectful use raised by participants are important, and need to be addressed if a safe and functional forum is to be established.

Missing People UK (MPUK) hosts an online support forum for those with a missing loved one. They have shown that with safeguards in place, a safe forum can be created. Users must register through MPUK, are given a document on acceptable use and a MPUK staff member moderates the forum part-time. Participants clearly indicated they want FFMPU to be a "gatekeeper" for the forum and the registration process could involve the provision of user guidelines. Additionally an FFMPU team member could periodically moderate the forum. It is promising that MPUK stated that in the three years their forum has existed, there have been no major problems, and the same can be said for FFMPU's own online community around its Facebook page.

Participants were concerned that an online forum would not be able to foster a similar level of empathy and understanding as a face-to-face group, and given that the depth of communication is significantly lessened in an online forum this concern is not surprising. Studies have found, however, that online forums do in fact have the potential to foster an environment of understanding (Paulus & Varga, 2015; Haverfield & Theiss 2014).

Limitations

Although the online questionnaire enabled participation by non-clients of FFMPU, the population sample was relatively small being limited either to existing clients or to those with access to technology. As many participants were FFMPU clients this study did not reach a diverse population, as already discussed.

Recommendations

From the research it is apparent that families and friends of missing people gain comfort from knowing they have access to a number of support options. How or when they engage with these supports is dependent on first knowing of their existence, as well as their ability and preparedness to engage with what is on offer, and their personal experience of having a missing loved one. A comment made by a family member described the changing needs of individuals as dependent on where people are "on the continuum" of their missing experience. "The person at 2 years down the track is different to 12 years and so on", as are their support needs. It is therefore important that people be made aware of services from their initial contact with the police. A referral to FFMPU by police and other support services could help facilitate timely access. There is an ongoing need for professional education of service providers and raising community awareness of FFMPU services, and the issues associated with having a missing loved one.

Current FFMPU clients have access to professional support and information, individual face-to-face or telephone counselling, as well as support group programs. Participants in this research are largely FFMPU clients who engage with and are familiar with these support options, in particular groupwork,

which brings people together with other families. However, due to the scope, jurisdiction and limited resources of FFMPU, there are many who are currently unable to access these services. This research would like to make recommendations to expand support options for existing clients and for those yet to experience a connection with other families.

From the research an online forum has emerged as the most suitable additional network that would: overcome the many barriers to accessing support; allow control, choice and flexibility in its use; provide a group environment for people to meet and share experiences with others who have a missing loved one; and also be a database from which FFMPU could inform service providers, other clients and the community.

FFMPU would be required to act as a moderator to ensure safe, respectful use of the forum, assessing the suitability and readiness of interested parties, and regularly overseeing posted comments. Membership would be open to only those registered with FFMPU, who have agreed to the Conditions of Use. Although user identities would be known to FFMPU, a level of anonymity could be maintained through use of a pseudonym. Training in how to use an online forum could be facilitated by FFMPU at one of its many face-to-face events or through easy to follow guidelines, made available in hard copy or online.

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