Multiple missing:
An exploration of behavioural consistency in repeat missing adults

Project Overview

Research Context: UK police receive approximately 350,000 missing person reports annually, costing up to £2500 per case. Around 38% of all reported incidents involve individuals who have previously gone missing. In addition, missing episodes can indicate significant vulnerabilities, for example up to 80% of adult missing persons are thought to have mental health issues. Despite the financial and human costs that are associated with each missing episode, research into and theory development regarding repeat missing behaviour is underdeveloped.

To date, research has focused on children and adolescents who run away from care and on the related topic of absconding from mental health inpatient settings. This has increased our knowledge of prevalence rates, outcomes, and the effects on staff working in these settings. However, our understanding of why adults repeatedly go missing, and their vulnerabilities and experiences whilst away, are in their infancy.

The current project proposes the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods in the form of database analyses and in-depth interviews to investigate the notion of behavioural, functional, cognitive, and affective consistencies across multiple disappearances. This study aims to advance our understanding of why individuals go missing repeatedly, their vulnerabilities and experiences whilst missing, and to provide critical insights for multi-agency prevention and future safeguarding strategies.

Practical Outcomes & Potential Benefits: This is the first psychologically-focused study of its kind, and will provide an enhanced understanding of the key issues for strategic innovation in the prevention and protection of repeat missing adults. Results will contribute to academic debates in investigative and experimental psychology, human geography, and mental health. In addition, the study will also provide direct and impactful learning for policy makers and practitioners. In summary, the study will directly inform police and partner agencies' training, missing person policies and operational practices.

Proposed Data Collection: The project comprises 3 stages of data collection. Stage 1 involves analysis of existing police data in relation to adult repeat missing persons reported to selected Divisions of Police Scotland. Cases will be analysed to establish the nature and incidence of repeat missing adults and potential risk factors such as: age, sex, mental health, number of missing incidents, duration, and location found. In Stage 2 in-depth interviews and psychological testing will be conducted with located repeat missing adults to provide critical insights into the nature of individuals' missing episodes including psychological, functional, behavioural and geographical aspects to identify potential consistencies. Finally, stage 3 will involve interviews with care providers within the top 10 locations for repeat missing adults across Scotland (e.g., hospitals) and will be focused on their views, responsibilities, experiences and attitudes towards repeat missing adults.

Dissemination and Timescales: Subject to approval, data collection and analysis will take place during the following times:

> Stage 1: March 2016 – July 2016
> Stage 2: August 2016 – July 2017
> Stage 3: July 2017 – October 2017
> Completed report: August 2018

Throughout the course of the research project briefing papers will be routinely disseminated to all partner agencies, stakeholders, and supporting bodies. In addition, the research data will be used as the basis for the researchers' PhD thesis, papers in peer-reviewed academic journals, and presentations at professional and academic meetings and conferences.

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About the Research Team:

Claire Taylor is a PhD researcher at Abertay University, Dundee. She graduated from the University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, in July 2014 with a First Class Honours degree in Psychology. She then returned to the university to complete her Masters in Psychological Research Methods. Claire has previously worked in the healthcare sector and has extensive experience supporting vulnerable individuals.

Dr Penny Woolnough is a Registered Forensic Psychologist and Lecturer in Forensic Psychology at Abertay University. Prior to this she spent 16 years working for the Police during which time she pioneered the development of a behavioural profiling approach to police-led missing person cases. She acts as an Expert Advisor to the UK National Crime Agency and to Police Scotland in relation to missing persons. Her research interests focus on the policing of vulnerable persons and she is currently engaged in projects relating to missing persons, suicide, and public protection.

Professor Geoff Dickens has been a registered mental health nurse for 22 years. Geoff's current research focuses on the use of structured tools to predict and prevent aggression, and other adverse risk outcomes, in mental health services. He has authored more than sixty peer reviewed research papers on topics related to violence risk assessment, firesetting, borderline personality disorder, and medicines administration.

This project has been endorsed by the UK Police Missing Persons Bureau and the national charity Missing People.