

Lost from the conversation: Missing people, and the role of Police media in shaping community awareness

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Aalia Siddiqui and Sarah Wayland 

The University of Sydney, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia

Abstract

Media as a public health messaging tool can shape community perception. In missing persons' investigations Police utilise media to assist in location and recovery of absent people. This study, of Australian media in 2019, revealed that the statistical evidence of who goes missing, and returns, revealed that is not replicated in news articles. Content analysis of 2,400 media items highlighting a disconnect between statistical rate of return from being missing (up to 98%) and the media profiling those who return (17% of media articles including returned missing persons narratives). In addition, Police and family dominate media conversations paying minimal attention to the reasons why people vanish or including comment from those who return. Recommendations for Police media strategies, that include an accurate portrayal of the experiences of returned missing persons, as a public health tool, is required.

Keywords

Missing persons, Police, support services, media analysis, reintegration support, Australian media

Introduction

In Australia 38,000 people are reported missing to police each year (Bricknell and Renshaw, 2016). While approximately 90% of individuals are located within the first week of their disappearance, others may remain missing for extended periods of time (James et al., 2008). The Australian Federal Police's (AFP) definition of a missing person is 'Anyone who is reported missing to police, whose whereabouts are unknown,

Corresponding author:

Sarah Wayland, University of New England, Armidale NSW 2350, Australia.
Email: swaylan2@une.edu.au

and there are fears for the safety or concern for the welfare of that person' (Bricknell and Renshaw, 2016).

The international literature regarding missing persons is severely limited, especially regarding adult populations. Previous literature focuses on children and youth, therefore unintentionally creating a deficit within adult missing persons research (Stevenson et al., 2013). Australian research predominantly focuses on the geographic location of missing people and the Police effort and funding involved in the search. The reintegration of missing individuals back into society is generally disregarded (Kiernan and Henderson, 2002). Existing literature also focuses on identification of vulnerable groups, such as those with mental illness and exposure to violence, being more at risk of going missing (Foy, 2016). Additional risk factors identified by Australian Police highlight 'known mental, cognitive and physical conditions' in addition to 'intent to self-harm or attempt suicide' (p. 14) used to emphasise timely searching to quickly locate an individual (Bricknell, 2017).

Identified factors highlight the potentially traumatic and challenging process of going missing, further exposing the vulnerabilities of individuals while they are absent from their support networks (Sowerby and Thomas, 2017). Societal stigmatisation is attached to the label of 'missing persons' meaning that the term 'missing' may be seen as attention-seeking or costly to emergency services. Missing persons can thus be seen to represent societal perceptions, such as inconsiderateness to their family, and a trait attached to mental health behaviours; creating a culture of shame due to the implied labels impacting others perceptions of them (Kiepal et al., 2012; Parr and Stevenson, 2013; Stevenson and Woolnough, 2016).

Prior disappearance episodes present a key risk factor for missing individuals. In New South Wales (NSW), 53 percent of cases relating to missing persons cite a prior disappearance episode (Bricknell and Renshaw, 2016). The emotional journeys of returned individuals referenced within international literature describe going missing as an experience that captures the physical aspects of missing as well as the psychological disconnection from their life (Wayland et al., 2016). This time period can be broad; encompassing time spent missing, as well as the decisions made prior and the experience following a disappearance (Biehal et al., 2003).

Why is going missing a public health concern and what is the role of media?

The World Health Organisation defines 'public health' as 'the art and science of preventing disease, prolonging life and promoting health through the organised efforts of society' (CIFDPH, 1988). The definition of a missing person varies from jurisdiction to jurisdiction agreement on concerns for risk to safety and wellbeing are common. What triggers an event, that results in the disappearance of an individual, aligns with the World Health Organisation public health focus on the need for a concerted effort to bring about prevention. In this context, being that people go missing due to complex mental health conditions, to escape dysfunction, to seek out new ways of living, or (to a relatively small extent) because they are victims of a crime. Public health strategies engage a prevention focus which, within the missing persons sector (and the dominant role of Police in this

space) provides scope to use media as more than a location tool but a community-wide prevention strategy.

Going missing is a significant public health issue that requires input from government and local agencies, a process involving significant emotional, social and economic considerations for all involved (Foy, 2016). A recent Canadian study by Ferguson and Huey (2020) explored the maladaptive coping strategies as the trigger for disappearances, and the connection between high levels of distress and enacting a disappearance. This study provides insight into the lead up to intentional absences, and identification of the need for targeted support once located. In addition, Stevenson et al. (2016) explored the individual experiences of those returned, however there is no current analysis of the way public discourse and health awareness, such as the role of how Police media, may shape understanding and response to the health needs of those who vanish and return.

An analysis of the role of media in shaping community health messaging identifies that the public has the capacity to learn about health and health behaviour from the media (Gollust and Lantz, 2009). In the context of the Police response to missing persons, Jeanis and Powers (2017) identifies that media has capacity to shape society's understanding of crime, as well as influence ideas of 'newsworthiness' as to what cases receive prominence and what goes unreported. Disparities, regarding coverage that demonstrate the complexity of missing persons cases, across gender, race and age, has been identified in American literature, with little analysis of the Australian media landscape and its focus on missing persons cases as news items. Media analysis, from similar health issues, such as Skehan et al. (2006) explore the inclusion of the Mindframe media guidelines for reporting suicide and mental illness in Australian media. In conceptualising the impact of these guidelines, authors noted that effective use of guidelines for media professionals increased likelihood of awareness-raising thus impacting community call to action, to assist in reducing suicide rates and reduction of stigma associated with mental illness. There are no guidelines currently available for media professionals to shape their reporting responsibilities, nor the nuanced evidence regarding the reason why individuals are missing. In Australia the only national concerted campaign occurs each year during National Missing Persons Week, coordinated by the Australian Federal Police, but without policy guidelines outlining how cases should be reported and which cases are put forth via State and territory Police Missing Persons Units.

Missing persons cases that are reported in media, and the impact of public health perception via messaging from media, has not yet been researched. This paper seeks to understand the experiences of going missing in Australia media, following on to a discussion regarding how, authentic inclusion of missing people in media stories, may provide scope to improve awareness of support and in turn improve population health.

Methods

The study of media content seeks to understand who says what, in which channel, to whom and what effect (Lasswell, 1948). The research question was developed to examine the inclusion of missing and returned persons within Australian media, as a way to explore how media portrayal may shape perceptions of missing people. The research team utilised (Roy et al., 2007) media analysis methodology. The methodology reflected that while

electronic search databases allow for faster retrieval of articles that meet the search criteria, hand searching (to ensure false positives were excluded) was also required. The following outlines the process to ensure, as noted by Roy et al. (2007), 'transparency about the choices and decisions made in determining the sample' (p. 9).

The research was undertaken during time period of the first author's candidature, published between January 2019 and September 2019. Inclusion criteria (see Appendix 1) aimed to identify and track the discourse and trends surrounding the missing experience during. Media, for this project was defined as content published via news outlets, online, and excluded social media. The time period was also chosen as it allowed information and trends to arise, in order to allow adequate timeframe to illustrate shifts in perceptions and discourse (Altheide, 2000). Initially, peer-reviewed databases were searched. These included Ovid Medline, PubMed, Proquest Central, Australian newspapers via Factiva, Age (The Age), Sydney Morning Herald, Factiva.com (mid-1980s–present), Australia/New Zealand Reference Centre Plus & Newspaper Source Plus Ebsco and Trove Digitised Newspapers. This search yielded minimal relevant results due to indexing errors noted on the database. Thus, the handsearching of multiple online media outlets was concurrently conducted including newspapers, broadcast channels, wire services and news magazines to gain deeper insight into discourse around the country (Altheide and Schneider, 2013: 83) (see Appendix 1). Roy et al.(2007) methodological approach was utilised, by accessing the top 10 most widely distributed forms of media dissemination within Australia, however a limitation identified the lack of search engines on many websites accessed. Therefore, a restricted customisation of search terms focused on terminology being constrained to 'missing person/people' across all online outlets. Search strategy and search terms have been included as Appendix 1.

A total of 2,406 forms of media were located for the analysis, however after the removal of duplicates and screening of both the title and full text eligibility in accordance with inclusion criteria (noted in Appendix 1), a total of 142 articles were included in the final analysis (see Figure 1).

The media was then imported into NVivo Software providing efficiency, multiplicity, and transparency to the process (Hoover and Koerber, 2009). The analysis of the data included two strategies – content and thematic analysis. Content analysis as a qualitative technique to objectively and systematically identify key characteristics and inferences of said content within a text (Matthes and Kohring, 2008). Thematic analysis, to systematic identify, organising and grouping of patterns of meaning across the data, to gain greater understanding into the collective meanings and themes within (Braun and Clarke, 2012).

Utilising Nvivo Software, an automated search of nodes (themes) was conducted to examine the recurrent content and word references within the media to gain a broader understanding of the data. This strategy alongside Macnamara's (2005) approach of combining computer automated codes with manually entered annotations. Each article was individually revisited and key content regarding concepts, spokespeople and perceptions noted.

A ground-up approach of immersion in the data was utilised to examine recurrent themes. This was achieved by grouping the nodes into categories, then consequently themes. This process was repeated by the research team to ensure intercoder reliability, with the data consistently being revisited over period of the project to ensure all facets of

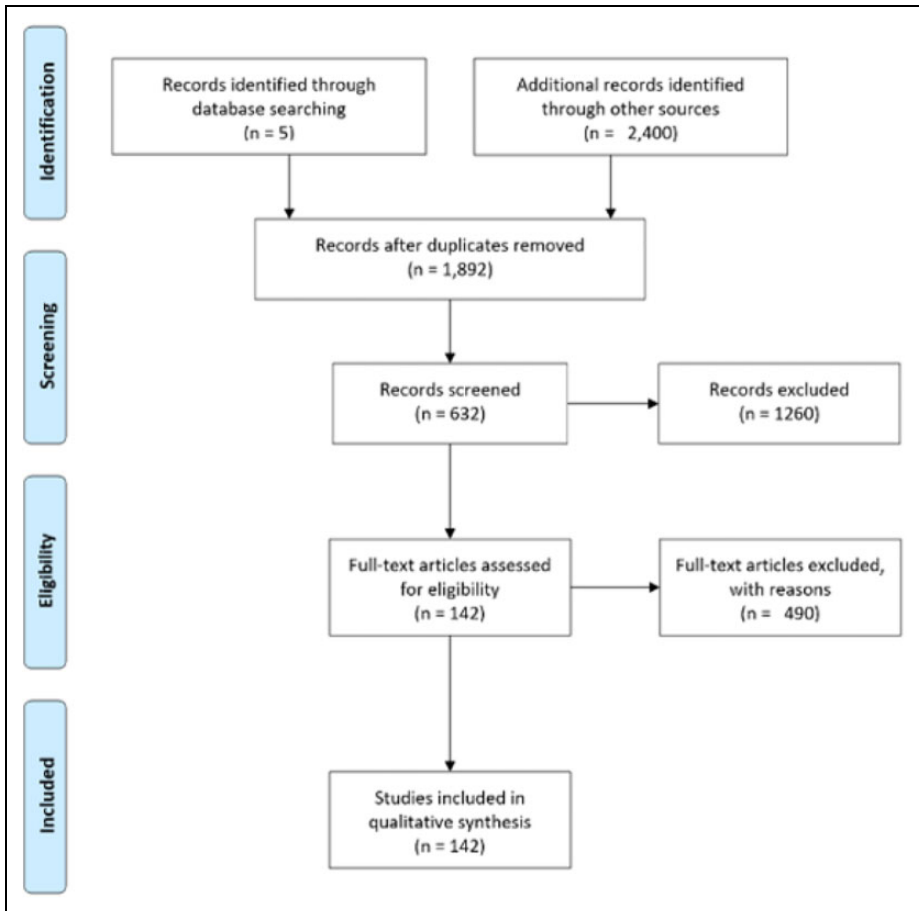


Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram of media analysis results.

content were covered from multiple perspectives. The articles were downloaded as transcripts and reviewed independently and coded by author one to identify block themes and persistent narratives. These were returned to author two who then reviewed the emerging themes to verify their accuracy and identified sub-themes. In addition, uncommon experiences were discussed across both authors to examine how these informed the emergent common themes.

Findings

Over 2,400 media items were collected; each initially reviewed through title searching, and then examined individually to ensure their adherence to the criteria. A total of 142 pieces of media were included in the final analysis. The media analysis examined the current inclusion and portrayal of missing people across various media platforms. While

2% of missing people remain missing and 98% return (Bricknell and Renshaw, 2016), the media articles gathered over the past year demonstrate 83% of media relate to going missing, yet only 17% reference those who return. The scope of the study sought to identify how missing people were included and discussed. Demographic analysis of the data was not within the scope of the study; however, the articles focussed on two population groups; missing adults, or children where there were concerns for welfare/victim of crime. No cases relating to family court disputes were present in the sample. All articles noted Police or next of kin authority to publicise the missing persons image.

Content analysis

Three common terms were noted in analysis of the media articles. With 'Police', 'search' and 'missing person' referenced in 94% of articles. Manual coding of the data revealed the majority of media referenced the potential logistical location of missing people and/or the role of family in shaping the police investigations. Analysis of the content revealed that a focus on the geography of locating a missing individual ($n = 84$; 59.3%), promotion of cold cases (unsolved historical investigations) involving missing persons ($n = 37$; 26%); and the scant information identifying that the missing person had been located ($n = 15$, 10.5%) (Table 1).

Manual coding of the data sought to identify whose perspectives were dominant within articles. This was completed by analysis of quotes within the article or paraphrasing of missing persons investigations including opinions shared by those interviewed. 103 articles referenced 'police' perspectives (72.5%) as the dominant storyline, 36 articles referenced 'family' (25.3%) and 9 articles referenced 'community' (6.3%) as sources for information and perspective. 16 of 142 articles referenced the emotions experienced of those individuals left behind, and 2 (1.4%) articles made direct reference to a returned individual's experience (Figure 2).

Thematic analysis

The thematic analysis revealed four themes present when media report on missing persons incidents: 1) Perceptions from dominant spokespeople; 2) Capacity to shape discourse surrounding a missing person; 3) Introducing perspectives of absence; and 4) Strategies to contrast public perceptions.

Theme 1. Perceptions from dominant spokespeople

Police. Police are the dominant voices in the media stories reviewed, over 70% of articles contained law enforcement commentary, with an emphasis on short-term cases, where the person has been missing for less than 6 months. 'Police-driven' media (such as an appeal for information or status update on a case), centres the conversation on the sharing only of police information, inadvertently only offering a police perspective on the issue of going missing. Police-driven articles seek assistance from the community with the location of individuals, with minimal detail regarding the reasons behind the person's absence or potential support needs unless for medical purposes (such as 'requires regular

Table 1. Four themes of missing person data, with example nodes.

Theme 1: Dominant Spokespeople	Theme 2: Discourse Surrounding Missing Persons	Theme 3: Perspectives of Absence	Theme 4: Contrasting Public Perceptions
<p>Police</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Police dominant conversations • Gate-keepers of the missing persons systems • Lead search efforts • Main source of information <p>Family</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family dynamics change when an individual disappears • Rally community support • Call out for help regarding search and rescue efforts • Community action fades the longer an individual is missing • Community awareness of missing persons is 'vitaly important' <p>Missing Returned Individuals</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No direct mentions • Perspective reported through third parties • Experience different from constructed realities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stigmatising language • Police often have clinical undertones – 'distant care' • Family/friend utilise highly emotive language • Family deal with the ambiguous loss of being left behind • Discourse dominated by external perceptions • Missing individuals' perspectives aren't involved in current conversations • Family forever hold out hope for return 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Police and family dominated • Risk Factors used to explain absence – i.e. mental health – can overshadow an individual's personality • Personality profiles constructed by family/friends • External individuals construct experience • Everlasting media footprint of externally constructed experiences • Missing Persons Week relayed familial experience of absence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Constructed perspectives don't match the realities experienced • Public only receive a one-sided story • Indigenous population group underrepresented • Mental health over-represented, with no reference to support • Disconnect with demographics • Stigmatisation of 'missing persons' • Public have preconceived notions of missing / returned individuals and their experiences • Deviations from social standards often seen 'inherently abnormal' • Family dissatisfaction with police, police frustration with family

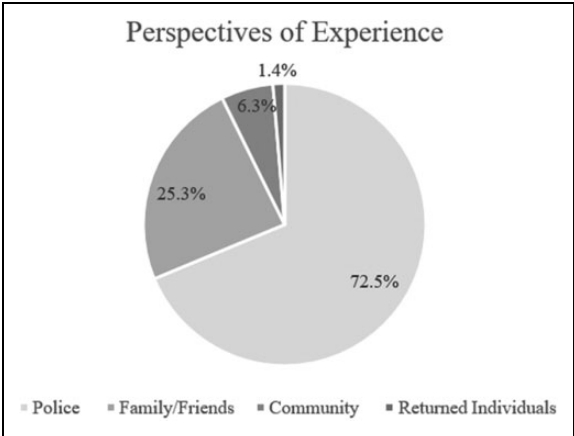


Figure 2. Dominant perspectives expressed in the media.

medication’). The following excerpt (Barry, 2019) is from an article which disclosed personal information regarding a long-term missing persons case to aid in his location however capacity to humanise the missing person was absent.

Detective Senior Constable Chris Hitchen said Mr Bale appeared to have become agitated and “self-deprecating” after the minor confrontation, and made remarks about his own self-worth. It’s understood he said he was “screwed up,” and “couldn’t do this any longer”

(News article reporting on a Council assisting coroner investigation involving a 38-year old man, missing 6 years)

Family. The perspectives of the family of the missing person also play a prominent role in the articles. Family perspectives were included as a strategy to aid police investigations by appealing on the polices’ behalf for information, calling for community searching and a focus on the end goal to bring the missing person home. Analysis also identified that those articles, where the missing person was absent for more than 1 year, shifted to family perspectives presented from their own personal experiences with missing individuals, and the grief and ambiguous loss of being left behind, rather than a Police commentary on the investigation. A rise within this type of humanistic media was observed during National Missing Persons Week (July/August 2019), which aims to enhance public awareness of the incidence of missing people.

Missing individuals. There were no articles, within the timeframe where data was collected, that aimed to illustrate the individual experiences of returned missing people, their support needs or any detailed resolution to their case. Articles that focused on resolution, where missing individuals were located deceased, included familial and community perspectives, in comparison to those stories where the person was located alive. The

majority of instances where individuals were located alive were usually in the form of an update on an already existing article, and rarely more than 1–2 sentences long.

A missing 55-year-old person missing from Cairns has been found safe, police would like to thank the public for their help. (Cairns Post, 2019):

This is compared to discourse when a missing person is located deceased, where more emotive and personal language is utilised;

This is my one job; all we want is to know where he is to bring him home. Either way, he doesn't deserve to be out there like a piece of garbage. (Fuller, 2019)

(Mother reflecting upon the death of her missing son)

Theme 2. Capacity to shape discourse surrounding a missing person

The analysis revealed a police discourse that was characterised by forensic language and terminology. Reconstruction of narratives, that may be viewed as being distant from a missing person's experience were observed, often spoken with authoritative language and with an absence on why the person might be absent. This is demonstrated by the police response to locating a missing hiker in Kakadu National Park, where no other information was provided about the returned individual

This is a timely reminder for members of the public to make necessary plans when travelling outdoors. (Australian Associated Press, 2019)

Articles where family and or friends' perspectives are placed as the central narratives utilise emotive language, in comparison to Police articles. The narratives are beset with concern, in order to express their wish for the missing person to return home or explain their own experiences in living with the loss of a missing person. In the quote below, family of missing Belgian backpacker Theo Hayes express their concern regarding the location of their son, and contact with emergency services

We keep in touch with them 24 hours, they don't sleep, we don't sleep. We try but it's not possible. (Brennan, 2019)

There is no discernible discourse in relation to the language utilised by returned people, as there is nil commentary by returned individuals. The discourse is thus dominated by external perspectives to that of returned individuals, limiting how they can be portrayed, perceived and understood.

Theme 3. Perspectives of absence

The perceptions as to why a person may be absent is gathered from the perspective of Police and family only. 47% of the media articles identified a police perspective regarding the location of a missing person. Comments regarding a missing person's personality

using disparaging language and a focus primarily on support to the family's left behind. What was also identified in the analysis is the role of family and/or friends also helped to construct personality profiles and knowledge based on their experiences with the person, as opposed to the person themselves, as seen by the subjective realities created by those left behind in Theo Hayez disappearance, from the perspective of a friend who was the last person to see him:

It seems like he was still happy where he was at that time, so he might've met someone on the way to the backpackers or decided to go and lay on the beach for a bit, we don't know. (Duffin, 2019)

Two of 142 articles directly referenced the individual's perspective of going missing, yet these were brief sentences that spoke only to satisfy the wellbeing of the search team. Such is the case when two hikers went missing, enacting mass media attention and search-and-rescue support to locate them under the assumption they were in danger, however this was different to the reality experienced upon return

When asked what it was like being lost, Mr Salvado had just one word. 'Serenity'. (SBS News, 2019)

Simon Semaan's perspective was relayed through family contact with the press in order to cease search efforts

... made contact with his family on Saturday afternoon after seeing media reports about his disappearance. It's understood he told his family he was okay, but "needed some space." (Latouff, 2019)

Only the second article, (Latouff, 2019) included follow up information regarding crisis mental health support.

Theme 4. Contrasting public perceptions

The analysis identified perspectives that referenced community attitudes and behaviours, such as volunteer services as well as those local to the area who may wish to assist with searching. These articles focused on the geography of locating the missing person via search information as well as referencing 'grave concern' for a safe return. There was also focus on the need to support the families left behind. There was nil commentary about the needs of the person should they be located.

Media, regarding police perspectives, were predominantly focused on locating the individuals through informing the public of their disappearance. Family perspectives were emotive in their inclusion of first-person narratives. The focus was on the missing persons absence; used to create search profiles in order to assist the location process and assembling support for searching. This is seen through family advocacy to locate a missing elderly man in Melbourne

Our family call him Peter Pan because he seems so ageless, he was still playing tennis at 92. He is fiercely independent and has a passion for vintage cars, he is a member of two car clubs. (Sweeney, 2019)

Only one article aimed to combat such detrimental perspectives and plead for greater understanding (Thomsen, 2019) by referencing the Australian Federal Police myths and facts about missing people, within their article, as a way to shape public awareness;

Myth: Details about missing persons are not confidential.

Fact: All details about missing persons are kept confidential and are not made available to the public unless permission has been granted by the family and investigating officers.

Discussion

The documented experiences of returned people within the media analysis, contrasted the statistical analysis of the prevalence and incidence of missing persons cases in Australia.

The media analysis was conducted to explore the ways in which missing people are commonly discussed and portrayed within the community and whether or not these findings concurred with the statistical incidence and risk factors relevant to going missing. The results identify that both the scant data and the ‘missing’ narratives in the media highlight areas of concern regarding the health needs of the missing persons population: impacted further by the lack of participation and inclusion of returned individuals’ voices. This highlights a disproportional skew within the data regarding media relating to a ‘lost’ approach instead a ‘found’ one, with the public receiving an unequal and misinformed narrative of the missing experience.

There is no focus on returned stories, despite the statistically significant amount of people who would have lived experience of returning from a missing persons episode, therefore missing any opportunity to enhance health awareness about the vulnerabilities inherent in going missing. From reviewing the data the primary purpose of media is to publicise the absence as a way of promoting location, Hunt and colleagues (2019) note that the use of media appeals (including social media) to locate missing children, ‘there is a limited understanding of how effective these appeals really are’ (p. 417), while allowing for images to be viewed by the community, the ongoing conversation, that addresses how a lens of location only, limits development of health awareness which in turn minimises missing persons population needs is discussed further.

Police ‘voice’ has precedence

In the public arena, the voices of the missing are not heard first-hand – there is no health strategy identified to respond to the risks of going missing, no law enforcement commitment to post-missing interviews (Holmes, 2014) or the vulnerability while absent or on return. The secondary perspectives of those other than the voice of the returned person dominate the media, which, by default determines an individual’s experience. Reasons as to why the person is missing is hypothesised by dominant spokespeople with no

capacity to remedy the true reason for the disappearance. Thus, it must become a necessity to include the perspectives of all returned individuals, not only to provide autonomy and control over media narratives, but also challenge the stigmatisation of the term ‘missing person’ (Stevenson and Woolnough, 2016); as the label often incites emotions of guilt and shame with missing individuals. The inclusion of such narratives will also assist in the creation of policy prevention strategies, aimed at reducing the prevalence and incidence of disappearance episodes (Liebler, 2010) without the inclusion of narratives of the returned – across media and research – strategies aimed at health service response are not evident, and if they are identified, are not grounded in an evidence base.

Mental health is often cited as a reason behind a disappearance as a means to explain the deviation in behaviour from the norm of not going missing. Data identifies that over 25% of cases within Australia (James et al., 2008) relate to poor mental health, as reported by next of kin, or services where the person resided as being a trigger for the disappearance. Narratives are skewed to one perspective shared – those left behind; the digital footprint of this experience is unable to be redacted, possibly affecting an individual’s capacity to return (McPeak, 2013). There is no capacity to assess the impact of revealing private information about a persons mental health, in order to locate them (Wayland, 2013). While family/friend perspectives of why a person has gone missing are important and informative, the telling of such emotive recounts has unknown consequences on an individual’s decision to return or implications for their privacy. Family support may be appreciated in lieu of lived experience from missing people however the analysis of articles revealed that returned individuals reported guilt and upset about the trauma those left behind were exposed to, suggesting that the anxious urging for location of a person may have detrimental impacts on the person who is lost.

The additional impact of the Police being the dominant spokespeople is also significant. While Policing and health promotion strategies (AFP, n.d.) identify that it is not a crime to go missing in Australia. However, the inclusion of Police narrative on behalf of vulnerable people going missing may suggest an inherent aspect of perceived criminality (Stevenson and Woolnough, 2016). The implication of this connection – between disappearance entwined with perceptions of criminality – has not yet been researched.

The data confirms that there are restrictions to the voices of missing people within the community, thus negating a returned individual’s autonomy to shape how support services may better respond to their needs. Just as in the mental health and suicide prevention space the inclusion of lived experience speakers, and representation from those who have experienced going missing is required in order to balance the narrative. Police conversations traditionally have clinical, magisterial undertones which, while acknowledging the family experience and distress, fail to take into account the individuals’ emotions (Fyre et al., 2015) meaning that the way in which the media structures the discourse surrounding missing persons enacts certain prejudice and stigma. Smith (2007) concludes that the culture created through forms of media can create a sense of ‘othering’ by creating people as a separate social entity, whose voices are silent. Whereby the conversations and experiences individuals create, by not including all voices, can further ostracise already vulnerable individuals.

Disconnect between perception and experience

The media analysis has demonstrated a disconnect between the individual experience of going missing and the public's preconceived notions, often differ from reality. Societal perceptions are heavily influenced by the media, as deviation from socially dictated societal norms is seen as 'abnormal' (Katz, 2009).

The minimal articles referencing aspects of the individual experience demonstrated very different perspectives to what the public and media had portrayed in the aftermath of their disappearance. The extreme dismay and 'grave concern' recorded for experienced hikers who went missing caused public upset, although the individuals' recount of the experience was described as 'serenity'. This community dismay and consequential action, however, has been shown to have a positive impact on the families left behind, as seen by the comments made by missing person Theo Hayez's family regarding the community support he has received trying to locate Theo (SBS News, 2019).

"Your warmth and kindness is like a balm on our bleeding heart," Mr Hayez posted to a group for the Byron Bay community

(Father of missing son reached out to thank the community for their support)

This disconnect is systematic across the missing persons spectrum, as perspectives and experiences regarding missing individuals are often created by police and family through a secondary lens, instead of the primary lens of lived experience. This further widens the deficit between perceptions and reality. Promotion of individual narratives could aim to negate this disconnect and improve the provision and recommendation of services (financial, emotional, employment) by allowing individuals to see the true experience of 'going missing'. This would aim to breach the disconnect seen in the media between the 'lost' approach as opposed to the 'found' one.

The media analysis demonstrated a deficit in diversity of narratives of returned missing people, despite the strong evidence base suggesting that most people will return. The disconnect between the people who go missing and the lack of conveyance of lived experience in the media may pose a unique problem to understanding how to address the increasing number of missing persons cases both in Australia and internationally (James et al., 2008). While the media analysis often sighted 'mental health problems' as a key characteristic of missing person profiles in the media, negligible data was shown for the 'support' of missing persons to enhance perception about how they may be received when they return. The context in which support was offered was only briefly mentioned regarding those left behind. It is of paramount importance to include individual experiences in the media as a way to illustrate the true nature of the missing persons population.

Shalev-Greene (2020) noted that a more in-depth portrayal of a missing person in the media provides capacity to identify biases and stereotypes. Bias about the health and vulnerability of missing people who return may impact the capacity in which people seek support as well as the understandings about their health needs. Research identifies a continued deficit regarding missing experiences from the perspectives of those once missing themselves. While the media is a useful source of data that replicates community perceptions, it promotes a clear disconnect between returned individuals and their

experiences due to the dominant spokespeople within this domain, enacting unintended stigma and limited capacity to respond to the health vulnerabilities that may trigger a missing episode or needs on return. Further analysis of new media platforms like Facebook/Twitter/Podcasts may assist in gaining insight into how media can broaden perceptions.

The findings of the study identify ways in which the use of Police media, can incorporate current research via Ferguson and Huey (2020) and Hunt (2019) regarding the mechanisms of recall and the predictive factors that may impact on the choices people may make, prior to going missing, as well as incorporating a broader prevention focus that addresses the health needs of missing people. Previous commentary via Wayland (2013) notes that the inclusion of sensitive health information, regarding mental health presentations, may impact the privacy of the missing person and as yet, the capacity for this to limit location is not understood. The media has scope to reach a large population of people however its capacity to locate people is untested, therefore reshaping the purpose of using media as a tool for investigation to focus more on communicating risk of going missing, support options for family and friends and inclusion of narratives of people who have gone missing to reflect predictive factors such as illness, disconnection or misadventure. Training of Police around the risk factors of going missing, as well as engaging Police media units, in understanding the nuance within the statistics or rate of return, may allow for more targeted campaigns that address the true nature of missing persons to better inform the community that missing is more than lost and found but a complex health issue that requires enhanced support.

Conclusion

Almost all media articles centred on the statistics that each year in Australia over 38,000 Australians go missing, yet the narratives of the returned remain untold within the public arena, despite their stories being the reason for the sharing of news. This media analysis demonstrated that the public discourse surrounding missing people does not include lived experience voices, needs and perspectives. Families who are left behind as well as Police modulate and interpret returned voices furthering a disconnect between an individual's experience of going missing and the narratives pieced together by readers of media. This in turn, negates their experiences and diminishes their voices within the community. Targeted strategies within Police media units to ensure safer reporting and authentic inclusion of returned missing persons stories in the media may create a rippled effect within the community discourse regarding why people go missing. While this area of research is still in its infancy, it has significant potential to positively affect the quality of lives of returned individuals and help decrease the chances of possible repeat disappearances through enhancing health literacy via public health media messaging.

Authors' note

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ORCID iD

Sarah Wayland  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7040-6397>

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Appendix I: Search strategy

Search methodology for databases

- Databases searched: Ovid Medline, PubMed, Proquest Central, Australian newspapers via Factiva, Age (The Age), Sydney Morning Herald, Factiva.com (mid-1980s–present), Australia/New Zealand Reference Centre Plus & Newspaper Source Plus Ebsco and Trove Digitised Newspapers.

Inclusion criteria

- Language: English
- Location: Australia
- Date: Last 12 months

Search terms utilised

((missing people.mp) OR (missing person*.mp) OR (runaway behaviour/) OR runaway*.mp OR abducte*.mp OR (lost person*.mp) OR (absen* without leave.mp) OR kidnap*.mp OR castaway*.mp) AND (((police adj4 report*) .mp.) OR police/) OR (((missing people.mp) OR (missing person*.mp) OR (runaway behaviour/) OR runaway*.mp OR abducte*.mp OR (lost person*.mp) OR (absen* without leave.mp) OR kidnap*.mp OR castaway*.mp) AND (support*.mp. OR rehab*.mp. OR (mental health.mp.) OR reintegration.mp. OR voice*.mp.)) OR (((missing people.mp) OR (missing person*.mp) OR (runaway behaviour/) OR runaway*.mp OR abducte*.mp OR (lost person*.mp) OR (absen* without leave.mp) OR kidnap*.mp OR castaway*.mp) AND (((police adj4 report*) .mp.) OR police/) AND (support*.mp. OR rehab*.mp. OR (mental health.mp.) OR reintegration.mp. OR voice*.mp.))

10 daily newspapers/country wide

1. Herald Sun
2. Daily Telegraph
3. Sydney Morning Herald
4. The Canberra Times
5. The West Australian
6. The Age
7. The Courier-Mail
8. The Mercury
9. The Advertiser
10. Northern Territory News

Handsearching strategy

- Top 10 daily newspapers circulating in the country, Top two country-wide distributed newspapers, three nationally disseminated news magazines, six national broadcast outlets, two wire services and one internet news source
- Search strategy for Handsearching
 1. websites were examined to ensure they had a search engine to locate relevant content, if not they were not included
 2. Using the search engine, the exact terms were searched, and then broadened to 'Missing people person + police support'
 3. Time limit cannot be set, although results can be ordered from most recent and worked back