

# **IDENTIFYING AND RESPONDING TO THE PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT NEEDS OF YOUNG PEOPLE WHEN A LOVED ONE IS A MISSING PERSON**

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## **Acknowledgements**

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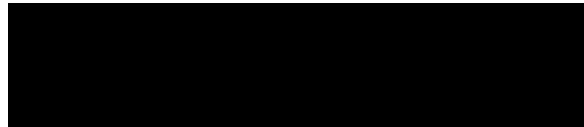
I love you and thank you. I hope you are almost as proud of me as I am of you both. To other family members and wonderful friends, who are unnamed here but who have been present, checked in, encouraged me, and believed I would finish what I started, even when I doubted it, I thank you too.

## **Statement of Authorship and Sources**

This thesis contains no material that has been extracted in whole or in part from a thesis that I have submitted towards the award of any other degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.

No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgment in the main text of the thesis.

All research procedures reported in the thesis received the approval of the relevant Ethics/Safety Committees (where required).



Elizabeth Davies

25 September 2020

## **Definition of Key Terms**

### **Missing Person**

The Australian Federal Police (AFP) definition of a missing person is ‘Anyone who is reported missing to police, whose whereabouts are unknown, and there are fears for the safety or concern for the welfare of that person’ (Bricknell, 2017, p. 5). The New South Wales (NSW) Police definition is almost identical but includes anyone missing from an institution and excludes escapees from correctional facilities.

Societal and cultural definitions of the term ‘missing person’ vary, and sometimes include other typologies of missingness; however, for the purposes of this research the definition (above) that refers to unknown whereabouts, fears for safety and concern for welfare held by the reporting person, a family member or a friend, and results in a report to police is used in this study. Every missing person in this research had been reported as a missing person to police. The use of this definition ensured consistency in participant selection.

### **Missing loved one**

A missing loved one may be a family member, friend or kinship relation with whom there is an emotional attachment. The family member may be a parent, grandparent, sibling, aunt, uncle or any other person having a relationship within the family unit. The terms missing person and missing loved one are used interchangeably throughout the thesis, although when writing specifically about the experience of those left behind, including young people, missing loved one is the preferred term and is indicative of emotional attachment.

### **Missingness**

The term is used to describe the state of being missing or of being a missing person. ‘Missingness’ is, in my view, an awkward term that I initially resisted using when writing; however, used as a noun, it better captures the state of being physically absent and psychologically present, and implies something of the experience of those left behind, beyond the state of being physically absent and psychologically present. For example, ‘living with missingness’ provides a clearer statement than ‘living with missing.’ Missingness is also the term used by a number of other practitioner/researchers in Australia.

### **Long-term missing person**

The AFP definition of a long-term missing person is someone who has been missing for longer than three months (AFP, 2019), and for the purposes of this research, the AFP definition is used. All of the participants in Studies 1 and 2 had loved ones who had been missing long-term.

### **Child or young person**

There are various definitions of ‘child’ or ‘young person’. Within the *Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998* (NSW), a ‘child’ is a person under 16 and a ‘young person’ is under 18 but 16 or older (i.e. 16 or 17). Section 3 of the Act uses the terms ‘children and young people’ or ‘child and young person’ to include anyone under 18, acknowledging that ‘child’ is not a descriptor that older children consider generally acceptable.

The International Youth Day 2016 Census (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017) defined a young person as being aged 15 to 24 years. The participants in this research were up to 20 years of age, which fits within the Australian Bureau of Statistics definition.

### **Family**

There is no agreed single definition of what constitutes a family (Kean, 2010); however, for the purpose of this research, family is defined as two or more people who share a biological, kinship or relational bond.

### **Family member**

A family member, for the purposes of the research, is a person who has a close relationship with the missing person, although not necessarily a biological relationship.

### **Ambiguous Loss**

An ambiguous loss is a loss that is not clear and may remain unresolved. The loss may be experienced as a physical or a psychological loss. Boss (1999) identifies two types of ambiguous loss – one where a person is physically absent but psychologically present, and the other where a person is psychologically absent and physically present. Experiences of ambiguous loss that relate to physical absence can involve a single person, as in the case of a missing person, or can involve greater numbers of people who are missing as a result of political or military conflict, natural or manmade disaster.

## **List of Abbreviations**

AASW	Australian Association of Social Workers
ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
AFP	Australian Federal Police
DOCJ	Department of Communities and Justice
DOJ	Department of Justice (pre 2019)
DPM	Dual Process Model of Bereavement
FFMPU	Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit
GP	General Practitioner
NMPCC	National Missing Persons Coordination Centre

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## ABSTRACT

No one gets what this is like for young people because no one asks. (Debra, Study 1)

More than 38,000 people are reported missing to state and territory police in Australia annually, with one to two per cent of those reported who remain missing long-term. The impact on the psychosocial well-being of those left behind of any age is profound. Australian research shows that for every person reported missing in Australia each year, 12 people, on average, are affected in some way. Young people are largely unrecognised within the research, policy, and practice as part of the population that is left behind. They are neither seen nor heard. Their loss remains ambiguous and unresolved, and with little recognition of their presence, their psychosocial support needs are consequently unrecognised and unaddressed.

This thesis explores the experience of young people who have a long-term missing loved one – a father, grandfather, sibling or cousin - bringing the experience of young people when a loved one is missing into the spotlight, to remind others of their presence in families and communities affected by the loss of a missing person, and to inform practice and service provider responses. The research is informed by the construct of ambiguous loss as a theoretical framework, and the related concepts of trauma and loss, coping and resilience. Each young person sits within a family, a community, and a wider societal context.

The research comprised three studies to address the overarching aims and questions. Studies 1 and 2 employed semi-structured interviews with ten young people and eight parents whose lives were impacted by the loss of a missing loved one. These 18 participants are related to nine long-term missing people, who had been missing between two-and-a-half and 43 years, at the time of interview. Study 3 employed an anonymous survey questionnaire targeting service providers coming into contact with families and young people left behind when a loved one is a missing person. It sought information about their response to and understanding of the support needs of young people whose loved one is a missing person.

A phenomenological approach to inquiry and thematic data analysis identified four themes - living with not knowing, recognising young people, a growing awareness, and supporting young people, and revealed a number of significant findings. These findings are: 1) young people experience the loss of a missing loved one as traumatic and

distressing; 2) living with not knowing becomes even more challenging for young people when those within the young person's network do not understand the nature of ambiguous loss and its impact on young people; 3) young people feel supported when their presence is recognised and they are purposefully included by those who are able to be emotionally available to them and provide a secure base.

Finally, the study recommends that service providers within the missing persons sector and others who may have contact with those left behind, including law enforcement, educators, and mental health professionals, need to be trauma-informed about the nature and impact of ambiguous loss and to work collaboratively in an interagency context. A trauma-informed approach that recognises and includes young people, and is responsive to their psychosocial support needs delivers best practice.

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

When my Dad went missing, I didn't know at first. Mum, and Dad's brother, went to the police station to make a missing person's report. They didn't tell me until he'd been missing for about two weeks. I really want to know what's going on, but I'm not sure of what they're telling me, and what they're not. (Young person, personal communication, February, 2012)

We didn't know how to tell her. I kept thinking, there's no good way to tell her and I worried about how it would affect her. I just hoped he'd be back before we needed to say anything. I hate to see her so upset. (Parent, personal communication, February, 2012)

In Australia, a missing person is defined as 'Anyone who is reported missing to police, whose whereabouts are unknown, and there are fears for the safety or concern for the welfare of that person' (Bricknell, 2017, p. 5). People of all ages and all backgrounds go missing every day in Australia, with one person reported missing to police every fifteen minutes, equating to more than 38,000 people a year. Despite often intensive searching by police, assisted by families and communities, one to two per cent of those reported missing each year remain missing and are classified as long-term missing people (AFP, 2017).

The lived experience of those left behind when a loved one is a long-term missing person, predominantly adults, has received greater attention in recent times (Boss, 2006; Clark, 2006; Glasscock, 2011; von Suhr, 2003; Wayland, 2015); however, the experience of young people, who are the focus of this research, has received little attention and has remained largely unaddressed until now. Young people are an integral part of the missing person's family and no less significantly affected by the loss of their missing loved one than older members of their families and communities, and yet they are a mostly invisible or overlooked cohort in the left-behind population. Research has shown that for every person who is reported missing to police, on average, 12 people are affected (Bricknell, 2017; Henderson & Henderson, 1998); so, while children and young people, from birth to 19 years of age, account for approximately 26 per cent of the Australian population (ABS, 2017) it is reasonable to extrapolate that of the 12 people affected, approximately one-quarter are statistically likely to be children and young people.

The loss of a missing person is outside of the normal range of losses experienced or anticipated in everyday life – its unexpectedness and unpredictability offering no opportunity for practical or psychological preparation (see Chapter 2, p.34; Chapter 6, p. 94). While the

loss of a loved one through illness or normal ageing may be no less significant for those left behind, such a loss can be partially explained in terms of cause, predictability, and timeliness. The majority of missing people fade from public view in a relatively short space of time and we seldom see those who are left behind in the aftermath of a loved one going missing – the individuals young and old, and families (see Chapter 2, p. 15). Print and digital media present the general public with often only fleeting glimpses of missing people that might show a distressed family member making a public plea for assistance in locating their missing loved one or a family lobbying to raise awareness of an issue related to the investigation or another aspect of their loved one’s disappearance. If asked, members of the public and service providers outside the missing persons sector might be able to name a handful of missing people. Those who come to mind are likely to have a higher profile based on factors such as their age or the circumstances surrounding their disappearance. Public attention is more likely to be captured by a missing child, or when the circumstances surrounding a disappearance are, for example, crime-related and the details of the disappearance deemed to be more newsworthy (see Chapter 2, p. 16). The many family members and friends who are left behind are rarely seen and are seldom asked about the impact of their loved one’s disappearance.

To date, the research on missing people has predominantly focused on the numbers of people who are reported missing, how many are located and how many remain missing, the reasons, often speculative, for people going missing and the economic cost to the community (Bricknell, 2017; Henderson & Henderson, 1998). When a person goes missing, what is lost and how long the loss will continue cannot be quantified, although the extant literature clearly indicates there are significant emotional, financial, and societal impacts (Bricknell, 2017).

This research focuses on the experiences of young people whose loved ones are long-term missing persons and explores who recognises their psychosocial support needs and how they are responded to by the various systems of family, community, and service providers. Young people are at a crucial and potentially vulnerable developmental stage in their lives, where rapidly occurring, sometimes unexpected change, and emotional, physical, and social demands are high (see Chapter 2, p. 31). The impact of a loved one going missing, combined with the developmental imperatives and expectations of, and sometimes competing demands placed on, young people at this stage in their life, highlight the need to recognise and respond to such a loss as one that is traumatic and potentially highly disruptive. This research emphasises that their loss is deserving of recognition in terms of its magnitude, traumatic impact, and, most importantly, the resultant need for support for each young person.



While the focus of this research is on the experience and psychosocial support needs of young people, such a specific focus does not overlook or minimise the impact of a loved one going missing on anyone, of any age. To do that potentially disenfranchises those left behind on the basis of their age, maturity, understanding or life experience just as young people report being disenfranchised for one or more of these reasons (see Chapter 2, p. 27). This helps to explain why the young people who participated in this research want their voices to be heard and their experience recognised, and to be kept in the loop. Those who care to listen or ask about the experience of young people learn that young people have a wish and a belief in their right to be recognised, included and offered support, as an important part of a family or group left behind when a loved one is missing.

While anecdotally there is powerful evidence that indicates those left behind, including young people, are significantly impacted by the loss of a missing person, the need for further investigation into the impact on those left behind has been repeatedly identified (Biehal, Mitchell & Wade, 2003; Clark, 2006; Corr, 2010; Glassock, 2006; von Suhr, 2003; Wayland, 2015). Service providers cannot rely on anecdotal evidence alone to inform and shape the way support is delivered to young people. Empirical research is required, as a matter of priority, to inform individuals and the community about the impact on and psychosocial support needs of young people when a loved one is missing, and to bridge the gap between research and service delivery.

This research contributes new knowledge to an under-researched topic – the experience and psychosocial support needs of young people when a loved one is missing. New insights, understanding and recognition of a phenomenon that has, until now, been unaddressed are presented. Previous research has focused on specific cohorts, such as family groups, siblings or adult family members of missing people; or on populations impacted by large-scale natural or manmade disasters, that have resulted in the loss of large numbers of people. To the best of my knowledge, no other empirical research focuses specifically on the unique experience of young people living with the loss of a missing person. This represents a serious gap in current knowledge, one that, once identified as a concern, should not be ignored (Jamrozik & Nocella, 1998). This research recognises that the experience of young people is a serious problem deserving of attention and goes some way towards filling this gap. It is only by addressing this problem that a more compassionate and informed response to young people living with the loss of a missing loved one becomes possible.

This research is concerned with the experience of young people who have a long-term missing loved one. It seeks to give young people a voice to describe their experience at the

time of learning that their loved one is a missing person and, in the months, and years, that follow. Through their voices, the research will assist others to understand their experience and their need for support, within the context of a system affected by the loss of a missing person, which includes family members, peers, the community, service providers, and broader social networks. This research identifies recent practice in relation to the recognition of and support provided to young people, and the experience and understanding of those who care for and support them.

There are three overarching research aims:

1. to develop and promote an understanding of the experience of young people when a loved one is missing, including an understanding of the impact of missingness, the psychosocial support needs of young people, and the way these support needs are acknowledged and responded to by parents, carers, and service providers;
2. to describe the role of parents in responding to the support needs of young people; and
3. to identify and inform best practice in responding to young people and those who support them when someone is missing.

The research comprises three studies to address these aims. Study 1 focuses on a sample of ten young people and adults who, as young people up to 20 years of age, experienced the loss of a missing loved one. Study 2 focuses on a sample of parents who have a young person in their care or have cared for a young person who experienced such a loss. Studies 1 and 2 both employed semi-structured interviews to elicit participants' individual stories. Study 3 targeted service providers from a range of government and non-government agencies who have contact with families and young people who have experienced the loss of a missing person. The research from the three studies will improve the recognition young people receive, as an important part of the left-behind population, and identify ways in which service providers and social systems might be better equipped to respond to and support young people, the parents of young people, and the many others left behind when a loved one is missing.

The current chapter provides the background to the research and introduces the topic, acknowledging how little is understood about the experience of young people when a loved one is a long-term missing person. The rationale for the research and an explanation of the significance of the research are provided. The overarching aims and the three studies which comprise the research are briefly explained. An overview of what is covered in the following chapters is provided here.

Chapter 2, *Stepping into the World of Missing Persons* begins by introducing the phenomenon of missing persons at an international, Australian and state-based level, presenting statistical information relevant to an Australian jurisdiction, and the relevant service providers and agencies within the missing persons sector. In particular, the work of agencies within the NSW Department of Communities and Justice and NSW Police is discussed. A review of the literature relevant to the study, which includes the trauma, grief and loss literature is presented, acknowledging the move away from the more traditional stage models of grief towards models that recognise experiences of grief where the loss remains ambiguous, and where resolution or closure are not deemed to be the goal of the grieving process, and may at times be considered impossible in both the literature and research. The chapter explores the concepts of ambiguous loss and disenfranchised grief as they relate to, and influence, the experience and support needs of young people who have experienced trauma and loss.

Chapter 3 presents the research problem, the overarching aims of the research and, finally, the research questions for each of the three studies. Chapter 4 presents the methodology selected to address the problem and meet the aims of the research. The chapter begins with an explanation of the reasons for selecting an interpretive phenomenological methodology that focuses on the lived experience of young people, and the parents of young people living with the loss of a missing loved one. The methods used to collect the data in the three studies – semi-structured interviews in Studies 1 and 2 with young people and parents, and a survey questionnaire for service providers working with families and young people when a loved one is missing – are then explained. The intended participants in each of the three studies are identified, and the research questions to be addressed in each study are stated. Finally, the beginnings of my interest in this study, my transition from the role of practitioner to insider researcher and the reasons for undertaking a study into the experience of young people living with the loss of a long-term missing loved one are explicated.

Chapter 5 is the first of four chapters that present the analysis of the data, including the themes generated from Studies 1, 2, and 3. In this chapter the missing people, the research participants in Studies 1 and 2 – the young people and parents of young people – and the service providers in Study 3 are introduced. The aim of this chapter is to provide the family context for each missing person and the research participants related to them. A snapshot of each family grouping is presented using pseudonyms for the missing people, the young people, and the parents. Study 3 participants, the service providers, are identified by place of work or professional title.

In Chapters 6, 7, and 8, the four themes – recognising young people, living with not knowing, a growing awareness, and finding support – are discussed and the research questions for each study addressed. The voices of the young people are heard and are combined with the words of parents to explicate their lived experience. Chapter 6 begins with a synopsis of the experience of two young people that highlights how individual experiences can be both similar and quite different; describing how young people are recognised in the aftermath of their loved one going missing, and how they and their families cope with the challenges of living with not knowing. The significant events surrounding being informed that their loved one was missing and how that occurred are discussed, followed by a description of how each young person coped with the practical and psychosocial impacts of their loved one being a missing person. Chapter 7 delves further into the theme of recognising young people and introduces a new theme – a growing awareness. The views of young people on being able to access information and being kept updated about their missing loved one with the limited information available, their observations of the investigation and their interactions with service providers are discussed. Within the theme of a growing awareness, the making of meaning and memories about their missing loved one, learning more about themselves and being allowed to be young people are examined. In Chapter 8, the final theme – supporting young people living with ambiguous loss – is introduced, and how, when, and from whom young people accessed and received support is explained. In particular, those who had the potential to be part of the young person’s support network, those who recognised the impact of trauma, and those who were then able to be psychologically present for each young person are discussed.

Chapter 9 presents a discussion of the systemic response to young people, informed by the response of service providers to the Qualtrics survey questionnaire. The need for a trauma-informed response, combined with interagency collaboration across all of the agencies that have a role to play in providing services to the family members and friends of missing people, and who have direct or indirect contact with young people when a loved one is missing is examined. Chapter 10 presents the discussion and conclusion, with recommendations for best practice in working with young people to ensure their psychosocial support needs are identified and responded to and, most importantly, that young people are, in their words, *kept in the loop* when a loved one is missing. Implications for theory, research, and practice and, finally, assumptions and limitations of the research are discussed.

## **CHAPTER 2**

# **THE WORLD OF MISSING PERSONS THROUGH THE EYES OF YOUNG PEOPLE**

### **Introduction**

The literature in this chapter relates to the world of missing people, the systemic responses to missing people and those left behind, and the experience of young people who live with the loss of a missing loved one. The chapter identifies the gaps in the literature and research pertaining to the psychosocial experience of young people in this context. The extant literature relating to the psychosocial experience of adults who live with the loss of a missing loved one is explored before looking at the experience of young people and their experience of support in the presence of grief and loss (not necessarily the loss of a missing loved one). In helping to understand and contextualise the experience of young people, their developmental perspectives and the impact of traumatic events are considered, along with the emergence of resilience.

### **Stepping into the World of Missing Persons**

The phenomenon of people going missing is a global one. Differences in legal, cultural, and social practices, and across jurisdictions, contribute to variations in how and who is reported missing and who is recognised as a missing person. The circumstances that surround the event of a person becoming missing, the response of service providers, including investigators, and the search efforts that follow may all vary. Socio-political factors and infrastructure, financial and practical resources, and geography can all affect the capacity to both mount a search and to continue to search for those who are missing.

In 2003, Biehal et al. reported that there were no national figures in the United Kingdom on missing people and at the time offered an estimate of between 100,000 and 250,000 police reports per year. However, since 2009 national data has been collected and the 2018/19 estimate was approximately 158,000 missing individuals in England and Wales (National Crime Agency, 2020). In the United States of America, the number of people reported missing to police each year is approximately 600,000 (FBI, 2020). Internationally, major events, including natural and man-made disasters, have resulted in large numbers of people going

missing. In rare circumstances accurate numbers are sometimes available; such examples include the loss of an aircraft, where passenger logs are available (Dissanayake & Wharton, 2014). However, accurate numbers for individuals going missing in day-to-day life are much more difficult to quantify (Clark, 2006; Henderson & Henderson, 1998).

## **The Australian Context**

In Australia, state to state variations in reporting – in terms of how a missing person is defined, and therefore how statistics are gathered concerning the numbers of people reported missing and how many are located annually – make it difficult to obtain accurate missing persons statistics. In an Australian Institute of Criminology Research Report – *Missing persons: Who is at risk?* Bricknell (2017, p. 6) notes, '[s]pecific data issues identified related to inconsistency in definitions of key data items, jurisdictional differences in data recording practices and jurisdictional variation in the data items recorded or provided to the study'.

Statistics on the number of reports to state and territory jurisdictions are not consistently gathered because 'different reporting practices across jurisdictions make comparisons problematic' (James, Anderson & Putt, 2008, p. 14). Bricknell and Renshaw (2016) report that between 2008 and 2015 more than 305,000 missing persons reports were made to police, averaging 38,159 reports annually, although a 2015 snapshot of missing persons in Australia revealed 40,580 missing persons reports had been made in 2015 (Bricknell, 2017). The various definitions of a missing person, difficulties in identifying and quantifying unreported missing people, and variations in reporting rates across police jurisdictions (Bricknell, 2017; James et al., 2008) suggest that many of the quoted statistics are likely to be under-estimates. In some Australian jurisdictions, an additional category, 'absent', is used to record a person whose whereabouts are unknown but for whom there are no serious concerns regarding their safety or welfare. Another term, 'absconder', is applied in some jurisdictions to people who are reported absent or missing from a health or care facility (such as a hospital, mental health care facility or aged care facility) or wards of the state absent or missing from out-of-home care. This term does not apply in New South Wales (NSW), where the definition of missing person specifically includes a person missing from a health or care facility or out-of-home care.

While the majority of missing people return or are located alive, a relatively small number remain missing indefinitely (Bricknell, 2017), with Henderson and Henderson (1998) finding that approximately 98 per cent of those reported missing in Australia were located within six months and approximately two per cent remained missing. Biehal et al. (2003)

suggest that these percentages were comparable to available figures from overseas reporting. Currently in Australia there are approximately 2600 long-term missing people (AFP, 2017).

## **New South Wales Context**

In NSW approximately 12,500 people are reported missing to police annually. Sixty-five per cent of people reported missing are under the age of 18 years. In NSW, there are currently approximately 760 long-term missing people (Personal communication, Police Detective, 28 April 2020).

## **A Profile of Missing People**

Missing people come from all walks of life, irrespective of age, gender, culture, sexuality, educational or religious background (Biehal et al., 2003; Foy, 2006). The reasons for people going missing are described by researchers as many and varied (Bricknell, 2017; Henderson & Henderson, 1998) and both ‘complex and multi-layered’ (Biehal et al., 2003, p. 14).

People who go missing do so voluntarily or involuntarily; so, while some may make the decision to leave, for others the decision may be beyond their control. Sometimes the reason someone goes missing is known and sometimes it is not. There may be much conjecture and little tangible evidence about what has precipitated the event of someone going missing (Stevenson, Parr, Woolnough, & Fyfe, 2013). Henderson and Henderson (1998) recognise some of the reasons for going missing in adults as: missing to escape; missing due to mental health reasons; missing due to suicide; missing for adventure; and missing due to being lost and forgetful. Statistically, a very small proportion of people reported missing are suspected to be victims of foul play or homicide, with two studies estimating the figure to be less than one per cent (Biehal et al., 2003; Bricknell, 2017).

Biehal et al. (2003) differentiate between people going missing intentionally or unintentionally and collate the reasons for people going missing into four categories: decided, drifted, unintentional, and forced. A continuum of missing people with ‘intentional’ missingness at one end of the continuum, and ‘unintentional’ missingness at the other is proposed (Biehal et al., 2003, p.3). Biehal et al. (2003) do not include the term ‘voluntary’ which has been used to suggest that the missing person does not ‘want to be found’ (Families & Friends of Missing Persons, 2016a).

Within the unintentional missing group are those who are thought to have wandered, have become lost or may be unaware that they are thought to be missing. This group can include people with dementia or an intellectual disability and those who are reported lost during a

recreational event or after a significant event (Bricknell, 2017). Significant events can include situations of civil war and military conflict, and natural and man-made disasters (Faber et al., 2008; Keough & Samuels, 2004; Keough, Simmons, & Samuels, 2004), where external factors may help to explain the missing person's absence. When such events occur, sometimes on a larger scale, the loss in these circumstances may also be able to be traced to a time or place; for example, many people were reported or became missing following disasters such as the Boxing Day Tsunami in 2004, the Japanese earthquake in 2011, and the terrorist attacks of 9/11 in the US (Boss et al., 2003). Years later, many of these people remain missing. On a smaller scale, a single person going missing may be unintentional, without identifiable precipitating factors or explanation, and despite much searching and speculation the precipitating factor(s) may never be known (Davies, 2013). Time and place of going missing might never be known for some missing people. Within the forced missing are 'the missing murdered and other victims of crime taken against their will' (Bricknell, 2017, p. 7).

Biehal et al. (2003) conclude that the majority of missing adults sit within the intentional typology and make the decision to go missing, attributing this decision to relationship breakdown, financial difficulties, family and domestic violence or to suicide. Along the continuum they also found that adults who had made the decision to go missing had experienced a personal crisis, financial difficulties, mental illness, bereavement, alcohol and other drug use, family or domestic violence. They were found to comprise more than half of the missing persons reports in Australia, where concerns relating to mental illness or suicidal intent were present at the time they went missing (Bricknell, 2017).

## **The Outcomes of Being Missing**

It is recognised that people who are reported missing encounter risks dangers while they are missing. Biehal et al. (2003) show that missing people were at greater risk of being physically or sexually assaulted, approached by strangers and threatened by people around them, and of their own mental health being further compromised. Significantly, missing people were found to be at risk of attempting suicide (Biehal et al., 2003; Woolnough, Magar, & Gibb, 2019).

Very broadly, there are three outcomes that help to explain what happens to those who are reported missing (Biehal et al., 2003; Henderson & Henderson, 1998; James et al., 2008):

1. The missing person is located alive.
2. The missing person is found deceased.
3. The missing person remains missing.



Bricknell (2017) identified two groups as vulnerable to adverse outcomes. The first is middle-aged men with mental illness or thought to have the intention to suicide. The other is young females aged between 13 and 17 years, who were identified as more likely to have a mental illness or be experiencing suicidal ideation at the time of going missing. Young people who are reported missing and have run away from home or care are at increased risk of becoming a victim of crime (Missing People, 2014). They are also at greater risk of victimisation if they are homeless, sleeping rough or staying with someone they did not know before running away. Being separated from their support networks and being unable to access professional help can also increase the vulnerability of missing people (Missing People, 2014).

When the goal of the police intervention is on searching for and locating the missing person, the high return rate represents a positive outcome in terms of success rates. However, for the 1–2 per cent who remain missing, those left behind derive little reassurance from the high return rate (Flint, 2005); and while long-term missing people are the exception rather than the rule, the impact on the lives of those who wait for information and their return cannot be underestimated or ignored. In circumstances where the missing person does not return, and continues to be missing, the combination of uncertainty, trauma, grief, and loss impacts all within the family unit and is felt for many years (Boss, 2006; Clark, 2006; Davies, 2012; Henderson & Henderson, 1998).

Hogben (2006, p. 328) writes that capturing information about missing people is ‘understandably somewhat restricted’ and often confined to capturing statistical information, describing the missing persons population, and quantifying the phenomenon of missingness. Assumptions may be made about the missing person and their family in each of the three outcome groups listed above. In the first group, where the missing person returns or is located, there is an assumption that all ‘live happily ever after’. While it is understandable to want to assume that this is the outcome when a missing persons returns, Hogben (2006) found that families and the returned missing people sought to avoid attention following their return, with what appears to be reticence on both sides to discuss precipitating factors that may have contributed to their reasons for leaving (Biehal et al., 2003). This unwillingness may be due to pre-existing difficulties within the family system or to a desire to protect and re-build family relationships (Biehal et al., 2003). The reality, often only anecdotally acknowledged, is that the contributing factors for going missing, e.g. mental health, family conflict or financial difficulties, may still be present following their return, or be further exacerbated by the effect of the period of absence.

## **How the System Responds**

This research is located across the interpersonal contexts of the individual, the family, school, work, and community, recognising that the psychosocial experience of young people cannot be studied only from an individual perspective, but rather within and across these systems. Social, cultural, and political systems affect the construction of social problems (Jamrozik & Nocella, 1998), and the missing persons phenomenon is a social problem with wide-ranging implications across each of these systems. This section identifies the key agencies and stakeholders in the missing persons sector and examines the significant issues that impact the systemic response. It is from within this system that support for those left behind should come.

In 2012, two tiers of support were identified as being available to the families and friends of missing people (Families & Friends of Missing Persons, 2012b). At that time, the two tiers included law enforcement and non-law enforcement agencies in the first tier and frontline mental health and support services in the second tier. There was no reference specifically to young people or their support needs, although families are recognised, and no acknowledgement of the presence of social media and advocacy groups. Social media and advocacy groups have emerged as increasingly influential in raising awareness, promoting missing persons' issues and lobbying for change at a systemic level. Additionally, such services are acknowledging and responding to the various and wide-ranging needs of families, with the establishment of networks, websites, and social media pages that share information and news and shine a spotlight on missing people and related issues. Some have thousands of followers. Others are offering telehealth and online counselling services. Examples of these services include the Australian Missing Persons Register, the Missing Persons Advocacy Network (The Funding Network, 2019), and the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement. The last of these, a public benevolent institution, describes itself as 'the largest provider of grief and bereavement education in Australia' (Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement, n.d.); however, these services do not specifically recognise the experience and psychosocial support needs of young people.

### **The Missing Persons Investigation**

In Australia, at state and territory level the police are generally the first point of contact when a person is thought to be missing. Police have responsibility for taking the missing person's report and assessing for 'known risk factors' related to the individual and conduct of

the investigation (Bricknell, 2017, p. 13). Differences in the information collected across state and territory police and in the risk-assessment tools contribute to differences in response and service delivery (Bricknell, 2017). Vo (2015), in researching UK responses, found similarly that risk assessments conducted by police were sensitive to subjectivity, inconsistency, and variability.

Families & Friends of Missing Persons (2012b) shows that following a missing person's report, a senior next of kin is identified and usually becomes the contact person within the missing person's family for police and the conduit for information to others within the family and wider social network. The senior next of kin is often, but not necessarily, the person who has made the initial missing person's report, is in communication with investigators and may engage with media or respond to media enquiries. This person may find themselves in a position of having to manage the information they receive and provide, and field inquiries from within and outside the family, while at the same time managing their own feelings of distress and being mindful of the distress of other family members and friends. For the next of kin and other adults who are parents or living in families where there are young people, the uncertainty of explaining the details of what is happening creates an additional burden. While the priority for most families in the early crisis stage of their loved one being missing is the location and safe return of the loved one to their family, few questions are asked about what is happening for other family members and friends by police or media. Anecdotally, most risk assessments conducted by police at the time of taking the missing person's report and subsequent follow-up do not include inquiries about others within the family, especially young people and their need for psychological support. Similarly, most families do not actively seek emotional or psychological support for themselves in the early days of their loved one being missing.

The time following a loved one going missing is a time of crisis and trauma, placing considerable strain on all involved. For those left behind the experience is frightening, confusing, and traumatic (Boss, 1999; Families & Friends of Missing Persons, 2012b; Glasscock, 2011). Families report that they do not know where to turn for support or to access information about missing persons' issues, and that service providers are unaware of support options if the need for support is flagged or recognised (Families & Friends of Missing Persons, 2012b).

While policing resources may be allocated to a missing person's investigation, they are redirected when higher priority policing matters emerge. This may be partially explained from a perspective of needing to allocate and prioritise resources based on urgency and magnitude of the problem, but it also appears that lower priority is given (unofficially) to adults who seem

to have disappeared of their own free will. In the light of the continuum developed by Biehal et al. (2003), which shows that more than 50 per cent of those who go missing do so ‘intentionally’, this suggests a very significant number of missing people who are potentially afforded lower priority. Family members report variable responses in terms of the police investigation, with some expressing the sentiment that their loved one’s disappearance appears to be of little concern to investigators.

NSW is the most populous state in Australia and, historically, the state in which the highest number of missing persons reports are made to police. Until 2019 NSW had a dedicated Police Missing Persons Unit, whose role was to provide operational support to police in the field to locate missing persons. Following a review that began in 2017 and concluded in 2019, the unit now sits with the State Crime Command and has been renamed the Missing Persons Registry. The Missing Persons Registry works with revised Standard Operating Procedures, which are not available to the public. Anecdotally, detectives within the Registry have a greater role in the long-term investigation of missing people, and there are plans in train to locate a dedicated missing persons police officer in each Police Area Command (verbal communication, Detective, NSW Police, January 2020).

It has been repeatedly stated that ‘Going missing is not a crime’, and neither is being reported as a missing person (AFP, 2019). A relatively small proportion of those reported missing are known or suspected to be missing as a result of a crime being committed against them, with Foy (2006) finding this figure to be almost 15 per cent. The primary focus of police as investigators when a crime has occurred is to finalise an investigation as expediently as possible. This is at odds with what occurs or is possible in a missing persons investigation, especially if the missing person remains missing long-term.

When a missing persons report is made to police, the family of a missing person enters the high-volume, physically and psychologically demanding environment that is policing (Duran, Woodhams, & Bishopp, 2019). It is at this point that the investigation and the search for the missing person begins. To the police officer, investigating a missing person matter is but one aspect of a demanding daily work schedule. For the family, the one who is missing is their loved one, and thus much more than a missing person.

A day in the life of a police officer moves quickly, while a day in the life of a family [of a missing person] stands still. (FFMPU workshop content, 2014)

These words capture the time-pressured experience of police officers in the course of fulfilling their duties and the different experience of the passage of time for family members

whose loved one is missing. Police experience high work volumes, characterised by physical and psychological intensity and changing investigative demands (Duran et al., 2019). This workload has the potential to contribute to police officers feeling ‘emotionally spent’ and overloaded to the point that ‘their bucket’s full’ (verbal communication, Detective, NSW Police, 30 January 2020).

Sometimes only one adult, the one making the missing person’s report, has contact with police. For families who are affected by their loved one’s disappearance, it is a ‘difficult space’ (Eliza, a Study 1 research participant) in which families have no choice but to try to find a way to live with not knowing, to wait for news and feedback about the investigation and to hope for a positive outcome. Young people observe the impact of their loved one’s disappearance on their parents and other family members, and their interactions with police involved in the investigation.

The decision on how much families actively search for their missing loved one can vary considerably and is an individual decision that rests with each family. Parr, Stevenson and Woolnough (2016, p. 67) describe it as ‘a practical activity that happens in parallel to, and not always in partnership with, official police search enquiries’. Search efforts within families can be influenced by the relationship the adults establish with police, and the family of a missing person may assume a more active searching role if their perception of police is that their loved one’s disappearance is not being taken seriously or being treated with the same urgency they feel (Clark, 2006; Glasscock, 2011). In other families, regardless of the police response, there is active searching which may gradually taper off over time (Foy, 2006). This does not appear to relate to families giving up or reaching a conclusion about their loved one being alive or dead but, rather, to families feeling they have exhausted their search options.

## **The Media**

The media has a significant role to play in drawing attention to the phenomenon of missingness, as well as raising awareness of and potentially improving search outcomes for missing people. People go missing in times of social and political calm and in the midst of social and political upheaval. In 2020, as most of the world observes the crisis and fear of the unfolding pandemic of COVID-19, people continue to go missing. Social issues and problems, such as people going missing, become less ‘visible’, receive less media coverage, and are afforded little attention when the focus of much of the general population is on their own health and survival, and extensive coverage is directed towards higher-profile issues. Despite the intense media coverage currently given over to COVID-19, images of missing people continue

to be shared by their families and by agencies working in the missing persons sector across social media.

Jeanis and Powers (2017) have suggested that far more media coverage and exposure are given to missing persons stories deemed newsworthy or perceived to be human-interest stories. Certain demographic characteristics, including age, and socioeconomic and racial background have been identified as contributing to disparities in the amount of media attention missing persons investigations receive (Sommers, 2017). Nationally and internationally, missing persons occurrences related to indigenous and minority populations have received less media attention and coverage than that accorded to cases from the majority population groups, and research has identified a lower return rate for indigenous and minority groups (James et al., 2008). Newiss (2005) reported that missing people from minority ethnic backgrounds were over-represented in the overall long-term missing persons statistics. Where the precipitating factors for missing are unclear, or the suspicion is that the person may be missing intentionally or as a result of mental health factors, the disappearance appears to attract less, and sustain little, public interest (Clark, 2006; Stephens, 2014).

Clark (2006) suggests that the greater attention accorded in research to certain types of missing may be due to the nature or magnitude of what has taken place. Events of great magnitude that result in many missing people, significant loss of life and destruction of property receive greater attention both in the media and the public arena. The subsequent responses to such events are often highly visible and socially, economically and politically driven, as evidenced in widely reported international climatic disasters such as the Japanese earthquake and tsunami in 2011, and the Indonesian earthquake and tsunami in 2018. Manmade disasters and events resulting in many missing people, such as the missing Malaysian Airlines Flight MH370 in 2014, sometimes named as acts of terrorism, evoke a powerful public and political response (Hunt, 2017).

While these events initially generate intense media coverage and social and political comment, ensuring they become prominent in public consciousness, this appears to be, at times, relatively short-lived, with media coverage often focusing initially on search and recovery efforts, and then rebuilding efforts where this is required. Some events are memorialised and may receive attention at significant times, such as anniversaries (Doss, 2011). There appears to be little recognition of the situation for the thousands left behind, apart from what might be called human-interest vignettes of individual experiences (Percy, 2016). Events acknowledging anniversaries, when they occur, may memorialise those lost rather than recognising those left behind.

While greater attention for events that impact significant numbers of people may be justified in economic terms, little attention is mostly accorded a single incident of one person going missing, despite the many thousands of single incidents reported annually that Boss (1999, p. 7) describes as ‘occurring more insidiously in everyday life’. After the initial investigation and media coverage there is often limited acknowledgment in the wider community of the family left behind, and even less of the ongoing experience of families if the time missing becomes long-term (Jabour, 2012).

## **The Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit**

In the late 1990s, a lobby group comprising family members of missing loved ones and mental health professionals was instrumental in obtaining NSW Government funding to establish the state-based Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit (FFMPU), within what was known at the time as the Attorney General’s Department and in 2020 is the Department of Communities and Justice. In 2000, Attorney General Mr Bob Debus responded compassionately to the lobbying of those left behind; some would say he championed the cause, establishing funding for what has been described by the current Attorney General in a press release during National Missing Persons Week, 2019, as ‘a ground-breaking initiative unique to Australia, providing free and confidential counselling and support with trained psychologists and social workers to help children and adults deal with the trauma of being left behind’ (NSW Government, 2019).

Glasscock (2011) named the establishment of FFMPU, a designated counselling service, in 2000 as the most significant national development in the missing persons sector. The FFMPU remains the only unit of its kind in NSW and Australia, working with people of all ages impacted by the loss of a missing family member. The FFMPU does not search for missing people but works collaboratively with police and non-government search agencies and stakeholders in raising awareness and providing practical and emotional support and policy advice (FFMPU, 2014). While working directly with families where the last known sighting or place of residence of the missing person was NSW, its publications, other information, word of mouth and social media extended the FFMPU’s reach beyond NSW.

Since its establishment, the FFMPU team has comprised a small number of social workers and psychologists, ranging from one to three full-time equivalent staff. Currently it is staffed by two part-time staff. The work of FFMPU is informed by a range of theoretical approaches relevant to trauma, grief, and loss, and, of most relevance, ambiguous loss (FFMPU, 2014). Contact with the families of missing people occurs via telephone, email,

internet and social media, enabling support to be offered to individuals, families and communities, geographically close or distant. Offering training, community education and publication, FFMPU seeks to raise awareness of missing persons issues, and provide information to service providers and those who are affected by the loss of a missing person. FFMPU has produced a wide range of publications for service providers, the community, family members, and friends. The unique nature of its work has resulted in several FFMPU publications being translated for use in Canada. One of these publications is 'In the Loop: Young people talking about missing' (Families & Friends of Missing Persons, 2016a).

### **Stepping into the Grief, Loss, and Trauma Literature**

Research, studies of grief and loss, and the resultant literature have traditionally focused on more readily recognised and acknowledged losses: those that are often identified as death-related, tangible, irreversible, and final (Bowlby, 1982; Freud, 1961; Kubler-Ross, 1986; Parkes, 1998). Historically, theories relating to grief and loss proposed that the bereaved move through a series of stages or phases (Kubler-Ross, 1986; Pollock, 1989; Worden, 1991) in a linear progression, with an expectation of resolution and of coming to terms with the loss over time. Time – the amount of time spent grieving, feeling distressed or sad, and longing for the one who is lost, and the amount of time spent in each phase or stage – became a defining factor in many of the earlier models. While the model Kubler-Ross (1986) initially proposed was later transformed into five stages of grief – shock and denial; anger, resentment and guilt; bargaining; depression; and finally, acceptance – the expectation that grief was 'time-bounded' (Fulton, 2003, p. 347) and would come to an end, remained. The bereaved were expected to move through the stages of grieving in an ordered way. This may provide some explanation of the often-used expression that the bereaved 'move on', having completed the tasks of grieving (Worden, 2009), as so often suggested and expected of those grieving death-related losses. Similar expectations are commonly directed at those left behind when a loved one is missing.

Bowlby (1982) recognised that children are not immune to the impact of loss and that their experience of the loss of a loved one to whom they are attached, leads to distress and trauma. Bowlby's early model suggests four phases through which the bereaved progress in coming to terms with loss.

- Shock, numbness, and denial, where there is a sense that the loss is not real and seems impossible to accept.



- Yearning and protest. This phase involves feelings of tension, grief, anxiety, loss of appetite, difficulty concentrating and irritability.
- Despair and disorganisation, wherein acceptance of change and irreversibility is reached.
- Reorganisation and recovery. In this phase new goals and patterns of day-to-day life are developed or rebuilt. Letting go of the deceased occurs and awareness of the loss is no longer at the forefront of the mind.

While Bowlby's model posits that these stages are interchangeable, with no specification about the length of time spent in each stage, the focus remains on the bereaved individual moving towards recovery and emotionally letting go of the person who is lost. So, while more traditional stage/phase models may partially explicate the experience of those affected by the loss of a missing person, they do not make allowances for the ambiguity experienced with regard to the status of the one who is missing and of those left behind.

Specifically, earlier models appeared to pay little attention to or overlook, the significance of the context in which the individual operates, a context including environmental, familial and social factors (Bronfenbrenner, 1986, 1989). The experience of a loved one going missing adds further complexity to the context in which the grief occurs. While considering the systems within which individuals operate, Boss (2007, p. 107) reminds us that when a loss is ambiguous, 'the culprit lies in the context outside the individual and their couple or family relationships'.

Later research (Glasscock, 2006; Zoll, 2017) recognised that models that adhered to an expectation of grief as time-limited, and an orderly or definitive process, were unrealistic. Glasscock (2006) asserts that where resolution is suggested, or in some situations prescribed, the application of such models to the experience of missingness becomes impossible. Implicit in earlier models was an expectation that if grieving followed the stages, and was done 'properly', feelings of grief would end. Again, such conceptualisations were recognised as problematic, implying a judgement in terms of how well the bereaved attended to what Worden (2009) refers to as the tasks of grief. Zoll (2017, p. 1) proposes a new model, naming stages of 'event grief, working grief, and forever grief' as a possible alternative, free of any expectation of the amount of time spent grieving in any of these stages, or the expectation of leaving feelings of grief behind.

## **Emerging Perspectives on Grief and Loss**

I spoke to my GP and told her I was struggling. Her advice to me was: ‘Well, I guess you’ll just have to learn to cope!’ (Personal communication, mother of a missing person, July 2016).

While the earlier literature often relates the grief experience to more concrete losses (Bocknek, Sanderson, & Britner, 2009), there is little reference to less tangible, more ambiguous losses such as those experienced by the families of missing people. Later theoretical approaches and models (Rando, 2003; Silverman, Klass & Nickman, 1996; Stroebe & Schut, 1999) have evolved to accommodate these uncertain and ambiguous losses. An ambiguous loss, such as that associated with the loss of a missing person, is at once unusual and less understood because it does not fit within the range of normal, expected human experience (Boss, 2006). This lack of fit and resultant lack of recognition means that the loss of a missing person has been often overlooked in grief and loss studies.

As researchers and mental health professionals have begun to question the traditional models of grief and loss (Hall, 2011; Stroebe, Schut, & Boerner, 2017), perspectives that consider previously little-acknowledged populations have emerged. These emerging perspectives have removed or de-emphasised the expectations of grieving occurring in stages leading to resolution and closure often implied by the more traditional, death-related models. In widening the consideration to other losses, these emerging perspectives have opened a space for recognition and inclusion for those experiencing non-death-related and more ambiguous losses, thus making a space for the families, including young people, of missing people. Stroebe et al. (2017) recognise that the expectations of the parameters set by more traditional models were unrealistic and unachievable, with the notion of ‘grieving well’ often becoming a powerful silencer for the bereaved when their feelings of grief continued unabated and when their ways of grieving were not congruent with the more traditional, prescribed expectations of resolution. Judgements about how grief was managed were often implied or spoken by others, or self-imposed by those grieving (Zoll, 2017). Laura, whose conversation with her general practitioner is noted above, formed the belief, based on the advice of her general practitioner, that she was not grieving in an effective or expected way, contributing further to already-present feelings of distress and inadequacy. Silverman (2007, p. 168) notes that ‘[t]he vocabulary we use to describe and explain the experience [of grief] may not be consistent with the experience of the bereaved’, reinforcing the importance of understanding the complexity, individual differences in the experience of grief, and the impact of the language we use.

## **The Dual Process Model**

The Dual Process Model of Coping with Bereavement (DPM) (Stroebe & Schut, 1999) provides ‘an analytical framework for understanding how people adapt to the loss of a significant person in their lives’ (p. 57). The model was developed from a cognitive stress perspective and describes the experience of grief as a dynamic process that fluctuates and changes over time, oscillating between two contrasting ways of functioning. The model can be distinguished from the earlier stage/phase models by its premise that although confrontation with loss is essential, it need not be the only focus. The DPM proposes an oscillation between loss-oriented behaviours, where the focus is on the relationship with the deceased person, and restoration-oriented behaviours, which focus on the tasks of everyday living as well as the distractions that accompany such a focus. In the ‘loss orientation’ the grieving person engages in emotion-focused coping, exploring, and expressing the range of emotional responses to the loss. The restoration orientation involves problem-focused coping in making the many external adjustments required when a loss has occurred. Restoration orientation can include finding new meaning, developing new life skills and, sometimes, using avoidant strategies to oscillate between focusing on the loss and restoration. The DPM differs from many of the earlier models that tended to view avoidant strategies as an indicator of not coping or as maladaptive. Instead, in this model, avoidant strategies allow for respite from feelings of grief and sadness, as an integral part of coping and adapting to changes brought about as a result of the loss (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). The model also allows for diversity in terms of the ways those affected respond and cope from individual to individual, moment to moment and one cultural group to another.

While the DPM is generally applied to death-related losses, it has relevance to losses that are not identified specifically as death-related and, therefore, to more ambiguous losses. An ambiguous loss such as missingness can be accommodated within this model. For those who live with missingness, one of many challenges becomes how to move forward while the loss remains unresolved, while missingness continues (Holmes, 2008); something that is more possible when both foci of the DPM – loss orientation and restoration orientation – coexist. Applied to missingness, the loss orientation can incorporate the grief experienced as a result of the missing person’s physical absence, while the restoration orientation allows those left behind to find ways to move forward with living. Taking time out from the loss orientation while coping with the secondary losses that arise when missingness occurs can be accommodated. While the primary loss of a missing person may be the physical absence of the loved one, the secondary losses may manifest in many-layered ways, including loss of financial status and

security, social standing or recognition, or a sense of control over one's future. For young people losses include, but are not limited to, the loss of a loved one, loss of an important attachment figure and a loss of security and control. Further losses may relate to how their loss is recognised or, alternatively, disenfranchised within the family and community. A restoration-oriented focus allows young people to continue to live as young people, interacting with various systems, dealing with the many changes that occur in adolescence, and taking on new roles and responsibilities (Carr, 2010).

The DPM allows, and recommends, permission to be given for individuals to take time out or away from thinking about, and having to deal with, the feelings and emotions associated with their loss (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). The DPM also posits that by taking time out from the sometimes-overwhelming pain of grief, the person left behind may be better able to cope with daily living and the secondary changes resulting from the loss that occur in people's lives. It allows those left behind to move forward without having to close the door on what is lost, and, in doing so, makes room for losses that are uncertain or ambiguous (Boss, 2006). It also opens the possibility of approaching and responding to the loss in a way that does not require a solution to be found, or resolution to be achieved. For the families of missing people this is most important because an expectation of resolution, if imposed or implied, becomes unachievable, potentially contributing to feelings of failure and incompetence (Davies, 2012). For young people, in particular, the DPM allows for the myriad experiences that they encounter and confront in their day-to-day lives; allowing space for acknowledging their loss and for accommodating new experiences that occur as they attend to everyday tasks of learning and socialising.

## **Ambiguous Loss**

Newer concepts that acknowledge and address the occurrence and impact of less commonly experienced or recognised losses, including those that have no clear ending, have emerged in more recent times. A variety of terms have been applied to these less clear, often non-death-related losses, including ambiguous loss, non-finite loss, and chronic sorrow (Boss, 1999; Bruce & Schultz, 2001; Olshansky, 1962). These concepts have more applicability to the experience of those left behind when a loved one is a missing person.

The work of Boss (1999) on the concept of ambiguous loss provides insights and direction previously largely unexplored. When a loved one disappears, and the disappearance remains unresolved, the loss is described as ambiguous (Boss, 2006). Ambiguous loss theory provides both the theoretical framework for this thesis and a means of understanding and

explaining a loss ‘more intense and difficult to deal with than any other life experience’ (Clark, 2007, p. 209). The literature indicates that Boss (1999) was the first person to use the term ‘ambiguous loss’ in clinical research. Boss described this type of loss as the most difficult for people to live with because of its inherent uncertainty and the difficulties in understanding and making of meaning that it poses in people’s lives. For those left behind when a loved one is missing, this uncertainty, the struggle to understand what has happened and is still to happen, resonates deeply for the families of missing people.

Boss’s research and practice grew out of her own personal and family experience of ambiguous loss. Before Boss wrote about the range of ambiguous losses, from both a physical and psychological perspective, she identified her own lived experience and the experience of others as first-generation immigrants in her ‘new’ community. The migration experience described by Boss and others (for example, Barron et al., 2015; Bhugra, 2004) of hopes and dreams for a better, more prosperous life, did not always eventuate. Boss described the sadness of so many unrecognised losses as ‘frozen grief’ (2006, p.1), where the ambiguity of losses experienced denies those left behind the chance to grieve, for grief to run a normal course over time, leaving those left behind frozen to the time when the loss occurred (Boss, 2009). In the aftermath of the World Trade Centre bombings in 2001, Boss’s work with a team of mental health professionals in supporting the many people of all ages left behind without answers to what had become of missing loved ones was groundbreaking in recognising and responding to the support needs of those left behind, traumatised, and without answers (Boss et al., 2003).

Boss (1999, 2002a, 2006) identifies two categories of ambiguous loss that encompass the experience of physical and/or psychological loss or disappearance. In the first category, a missing person can be described as physically absent but psychologically present. Their whereabouts is unknown and their return uncertain, but they remain psychologically present to those left behind. This psychological presence may be experienced in a number of ways, which include memories, dreams, and thoughts of the missing person, a place within the family reserved for them, or a sense of their presence experienced by those left behind at significant family events and milestones (Speed, 2011). Losses associated with forced separation, kidnapping, divorce, and adoption are further examples of this type of ambiguous loss. In the second category of ambiguous loss, the person can be described as physically present but psychologically absent. People with chronic mental illness or dementia-related illnesses can be included in this category. Boss (2006, p. 162) describes losses in either category as ‘both/and’ experiences, where the person is both here and not here, present and absent. Each can occur at ‘extreme levels of disaster or simply in everyday life’ (Boss, 2008, p. 107). Boss describes

those who are left behind as a result of physical or psychological absence as being in an ambiguous position of not knowing how to respond or where to turn for support and describes ambiguous loss as ‘something very different from ordinary, clear-cut loss’ (2006, p. 9). It is a loss that may lack official validation (Boss, 2006). For those whose loved one remains missing, the loss can be baffling and immobilising as it impacts those left behind for as long as they live with it (Boss, 1999, 2002a, 2006).

The basic theoretical premise of ambiguous loss is that it is one of the most stressful kinds of loss (Boss, 2006). The difficulty of dealing with such a loss lies in the environmental context of ambiguity, rather than being attributable to an individual or family deficit (Boss, 2006). Boss (2007) writes that ambiguous loss is a relational phenomenon and not attributable to, or explained by, individual psychic dysfunction. It is an external loss that defies resolution, where the ambiguity and often unresolved nature of the loss are the causative factors. Such losses can create long-term confusion about who is in or out of the family, where the family does not know for sure who is in and who is out of the system (Boss, Greenberg, & Pearce-McCall, 1990). Boss and Greenberg (1984, p. 535) refer to this confusion as ‘boundary ambiguity’, leading to support for a definition of family beyond physical or traditional legal parameters. Defining the family in both physical and psychological terms makes it possible to accommodate varying levels of ambiguity (Boss, 2007) and makes space for the uncertainty of physical absence, as occurs with the experience of missingness. As Boss (1999, pp. 3–4) reports:

The family that exists in people’s minds is more important ... personal narratives illustrate the bittersweet legacy of ambiguity about psychological presence and absence for ... families, especially when the psychological family is not in accord with the physically present family. Unless people resolve the ambiguous loss – the incomplete or uncertain loss ... the legacy of frozen unresolved grief may affect their offspring.

Thus, Boss (2006) proposes that families can be defined by both physical and psychological presence. An understanding of family that allows for those who may not be physically present to remain as a psychological presence within the family is essential for the families of missing people (Boss, 2006). Traditionally, the family has been the prime source of support, socialisation, and social control, and certain factors may enhance or inhibit a family’s experience of grief. Families in which there are divergent beliefs, fragile relationships, and secrets are held may experience more difficulties adjusting to a loss; whereas families in which there is frequent contact, established rituals and a willingness to express and share

feelings, may experience less difficulty (Schuler, Zaider, & Kissane, 2012). It is reasonable to expect that for families living with the loss of a missing loved one this is no different, and this research will further explore such factors.

The family system and the impact of ambiguous loss when a loved one is a missing person are inextricably linked. Those within the system do not operate in a vacuum. Ambiguous loss affects every part of the system, impacting interpersonal and familial relationships and attachments, family functioning, the identity of individuals and their behaviour. Those within the system, including young people, are influenced by every other part of the system. Missingness disrupts the equilibrium and can trigger a crisis response within families and change the usual patterns of relationships, roles, and functions (Boss, 1999). Bronfenbrenner (1979) recognises the place of the child or young person within the context of family, community, social, and political systems. Pollock (1989) acknowledges the importance of recognising that each person within the family system relates to the others, and the inability to attend to the needs of others – in particular, young people – can have lifelong effects.

Boss (1999) observes that the question for the family system becomes one of whether to move forward without the missing person or remain in the homeostatic state they were in prior to the person going missing. While ambiguous loss impacts those left behind physically and emotionally (Beder, 2002; Boss, 1999), the physical or psychological absence of a family member within the family system also raises more pragmatic concerns for the family system (Huebner & Gustafson, 2007) as it looks to find members willing and able to bridge the gap caused by the absence, including the gap left by the physical absence of a missing loved one. Previously understood boundaries can become blurred and ambiguous. Boss (2006) suggests that the situation for all within the family can become confusing, with family members becoming stuck in the same role, while others may no longer know what their position and role within the family means or entails (Betz & Thorngren, 2006).

Rather than resolution, reorganisation may be possible and aligns with Boss's concept of reorganising and adjusting family boundaries when a loved one is missing, in regard to who is in and who is out of the family (1999). Boss suggests that this is not absolute or black-and-white, and that there can be space and tolerance for ambiguity (Boss, 2006). Suhr (2003, p. 30) observes that 'the established models [of grief] do not allow for the never ending, unresolved nature of the grief that accompanies an uncertain loss', such as missingness. Boss and Carnes (2012) assert that ambiguous loss is not amenable to traditional grief therapies that move towards a goal of closure; and that in circumstances that are ambiguous, those left behind experience their grief differently (Betz & Thorngren, 2006; Boss, 2002b). Boss (2006) suggests

that a more appropriate support for those experiencing ambiguous loss is to help those affected cope with the stress that stems from the ambiguous situation.

## **The Concept of Closure**

The important relationships, in whatever form they manifest, never end. They are with us forever and become who we are and what we do. (Melnick & Roos, 2007, p. 104)

The traditional concepts of resolution, and of completing the tasks of grieving, have encouraged the bereaved and those left behind to ‘let go’ or ‘move on’. The notion of closure and ‘finding closure’ has often been defined as the end point of the grief experience. The often-implied expectation and social pressure to resolve grief through closure is a concept that does not correspond with the experience of missing (Melnick & Roos, 2007). Boss (2010) contends that an ambiguous loss inherently defies psychological closure because without answers or knowing the truth about what has happened – and, in the case of a missing person, without the tangible evidence of a body – closure is unattainable.

There are few rituals available to those who experience the ambiguous loss of a missing loved one. This is understandable given that traditional mourning and recognition for the loss of a loved one requires tangible evidence of what has been lost and what has become of the person (Boss, 2002b), something that is generally not available to the families of missing loved ones. Betz and Thorngren (2006) speak of ambiguous loss lacking closure and, therefore, the opportunity to progress through the typical stages of grief and conventional mourning rituals. It is the absence of rituals to mark such a loss in any way that compounds the difficulties families face; however, Boss (2006, p. 31) proposes that ‘learning to live with ambiguous loss de-emphasises the idea of closure’. Instead, the therapeutic goal is one of making sense of the loss; ‘the goal is to live with the grief rather than to close the door’ (p. 461). Boss further suggests that the societal pressure placed on families to close the door on a missing loved one who, while physically absent is still very much psychologically present, can cause psychological harm to the individual and can prevent them from moving forward therapeutically. When an ambiguous loss occurs, rather than seeking closure, Boss (2006) suggests the therapeutic goal becomes one of learning to live, and to cope, with the stress that stems from the ambiguity of the situation.

Betz and Thorngren (2006), like Boss (2006), emphasise the importance of identifying and labelling the loss of a missing loved one as ambiguous in order to explain and validate the difference in the grief response. Naming and understanding a loss in this way assists to



normalise the family members' grief response, allowing for hope and uncertainty to coexist. Comfort may be derived from this naming, and families may afford themselves empathy (Betz & Thorngren, 2006). The concept of self-compassion (Neff, 2011) aligns with this notion of families allowing themselves to name their experience as a loss that is worthy of feeling grief, where feelings of grief are permitted, without having to assume or conclude that the missing loved one will never return or is deceased. Locating the blame on the ambiguity of missingness as Boss (2002a) specifically states, externalises the source of the grief rather than inferring that individual weakness is the reason those left behind struggle with such a situation. Externalising the source of grief combined with Neff's principle of non-judgemental self-regard (Dreisoerner, Junker & van Dick, 2020) can help to reduce the likelihood of self-blame. Differences that arise within families, as individuals seek to understand and make meaning of the loss that has occurred, can be better accommodated if there is acceptance that there is no categorically right or wrong way of responding to the loss of a missing person.

## **Disenfranchised Grief and Loss**

No one asked what was happening for me. (A young person speaking about learning that her father was missing, 9 February 2012)

Doka (1989) contends that disenfranchised grief arises when people are impacted by a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned or socially supported. Disenfranchised grief may result from the circumstances surrounding a death or a loss but may also extend to social groups or particular relationships that are not socially recognised. Those who have experienced a loss may be denied or excluded from the practices and rituals that might be normally practised following a loss – and thus disenfranchised – because of their age, in the case of children and young people, and those at the other end of their lives, in old age. Some may be disenfranchised through what is perceived or judged by others as their inability to comprehend what has occurred, including those with a cognitive impairment or disability or, again, young people. Finally, the way grief is expressed or publicly displayed may be judged by others as socially inappropriate. Disenfranchised grief can produce intense emotional, cognitive, behavioural, physiological, and psychological distress – the same or similar to that experienced in response to death-related losses, with the same detrimental impact.

The occurrence of disenfranchised grief may help to explain the dearth of research pertaining to young people living with missingness. A loss needs to be recognised as a 'real' loss that results in grief for those left behind (Families & Friends of Missing Persons, 2016a).

If those who are grieving are not recognised as such, not only does their experience or need for support receive little recognition, they may not be seen to be worthy of research. Corr (2010) extends the experience of disenfranchised loss beyond bereavement, allowing for other losses, such as missingness, to be considered for their potential to be disenfranchised.

Hall (2011) observes that societies appear to have grieving rules that determine who is permitted to grieve, how that grief is expressed, and when, where, and for how long and for whom' those left behind are permitted to grieve. Within these grieving rules, if the loss remains unrecognised, if the one grieving remains unseen or if the time to grieve is determined by ill-informed, unrealistic or time-limited expectations of grieving, the experience is disenfranchised. Such is the experience reported by young people left behind when someone is missing. Young people may be disenfranchised through lack of recognition or exclusion in the aftermath of their loved one going missing, or by the failure (of adults) to recognise that they are affected by what has happened. If the impact is not recognised, or if the young person has no input or voice, there can be no recognition that there may be a need for support. Young people, by virtue of their age, may be thought incapable of understanding, and thus mourning, the loss of a missing person (Families & Friends of Missing Persons, 2013a). Disenfranchised grief also occurs when the loss is not openly acknowledged, as occurs for young people who tell their peers about their missing loved one only to have the loss unacknowledged, minimised or never mentioned again (Families & Friends of Missing Persons, 2013a).

A loss that is publicly recognised and legitimised is more likely to result in support being sought by those left behind and offered by those with an awareness of their situation (Betz & Thorngren, 2009). Hence, the need to acknowledge the experience of living with the loss of a missing loved one becomes pivotal in ensuring those left behind are supported. Attig (2001) suggests that the response offered to those left behind when a loss occurs may be informed by unrealistic expectations and assumptions about how people cope with and express their grief. If judgements are made about the nature or closeness of the relationship, as Attig (2001) contends, or about the circumstances of the loss event, there may be no recognition of the need for, or offer of, support.

The families of missing people report that they often feel forgotten and overlooked by friends, the wider community and service providers (Families & Friends of Missing Persons, 2014). The ambiguous nature of missingness – its uncertainty in terms of how long the person remains missing, resolution, and outcome – contributes to their feelings of a lack of recognition and acknowledgment and to their disenfranchisement (Boss, 1999; Clark, 2006; Doka, 1989). Feelings of isolation and stigma related to uncertainty – to the unknown, sometimes speculative

or assumed reasons someone is a missing person (Henderson & Henderson, 1998) – contribute further to the unease and discomfort experienced within the family and by those who endeavour to respond to and support those left behind. The little attention paid to the missing person and to their families left behind, socially and politically (Jabour, 2012), contributes further to lack of awareness of the situation and to limited understanding of their experience and support needs. This can become a frustrating cycle – when no new information emerges and the whereabouts of the missing person remains unknown, those left behind find themselves living ‘in limbo’, often with little or no information about what might have happened or is happening in the investigation, and contributing little to reassurance regarding the loved one’s return (Holmes, 2008).

Within the family unit and the community, people search for ways of living with not knowing (Davies, 2012; Holmes, 2008). Betz and Thorngren (2006) suggest that those who live with an ambiguous loss may not allow themselves the same empathy or understanding that they might extend to others, or expect for themselves, following a clearer, more tangible loss such as a death. When further disenfranchisement occurs, when the loss is not acknowledged by those outside of the family, feelings of distress are heightened (Bocknek et al., 2009). Families may begin to question their right to seek or be offered support if their experience is one that others do not recognise for its significance in their lives.

## **Trauma**

The experience of trauma is routinely associated with an incident or an act of violence, often occurring in the context of a crime being perpetrated against another person or associated with a disaster or an accident (Wraith, 2014). Likewise, a loss through death is recognised in the literature and in society as a significant psychological trauma (Keyes et al., 2014). Tangible losses or single one-off events are more readily identified as traumatic and associated with the predicted development of a trauma response. Despite the absence of a significant link between missingness and violence or crime, those left behind, including young people, nevertheless experience the disappearance of their loved one and the ongoing nature of the loss as traumatic. The need to recognise that trauma is an integral part of the experience of those left behind when a loved one is missing is imperative (Boss, 2006; Clark, 2006).

Herman (1992, p. 33) states that ‘[t]raumatic events are extraordinary, not because they occur rarely, but rather because they overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life’. While one-off events are sometimes referred to as simple trauma (Helzer, Robins, & McEvoy, 1987), the event of someone going missing and the context in which this occurs are anything but

simple. The trauma is compounded by the ongoing nature of the loss, what Clark refers to as ‘unending not knowing’ (2007, p. 17).

Boss (2006) recognises that trauma is inherent in the loss of a missing person, and that ambiguous loss, by its nature, is traumatic; however, much of the available trauma research does not identify, or in any way acknowledge, the event of a loved one going missing as a traumatic experience or the antecedent to a trauma response. When a loved one goes missing, Boss (2006, p. 36) contends that the loss has the potential to ‘traumatise a child or adult physically and emotionally just as a critical incident might’, and such a fundamentally traumatic event has the potential to contribute to the development of trauma symptoms in young people (Alisic et al., 2014). The signs of trauma that are regularly ascribed to other events are often misunderstood or overlooked when associated with the loss of a missing person. Such signs can include strong feelings of anxiety, sadness, a loss of a sense of control and feelings of helplessness. Some may experience nightmares, intrusive memories and difficulty sleeping. Families are fragmented and lives are disrupted in families where a loved one has gone missing, just as they are when other traumatic events have occurred.

If the presence of trauma in the experience of a young person left behind is denied or minimised, their loss is further disenfranchised. To acknowledge that the loss of a missing person is inherently traumatic is to begin to recognise the potential for those left behind to be impacted and the magnitude of that impact.

### **Young People Stepping In**

The literature examining the experience of those left behind when a loved one is a missing person has predominantly focused on adults (Boss, 1999; Glasscock, 2011; Wayland, 2015); the experience of young people is largely unexplored and undocumented in the existing literature. Boss (1999, 2002a, 2006) has written extensively on the experience of ambiguous loss, and the loss associated with missingness; although young people are not specifically identified in much of the research, it is reasonable to infer that the experience and impact of missing on young people is likely to bear some similar characteristics to the experience of adults (Families & Friends of Missing Persons, 2012a).

The traumatic experience for a young person whose loved one is missing is characterised by disbelief, confusion, anger, sadness, and guilt (Davies, 2012). Young people are often ‘invisible’ in the investigation, media coverage, and in consideration of support needs. One could suggest this lack of attention is, in some instances, for their own protection; or,

alternatively, their experience is disenfranchised through the failure to recognise their presence or that they are impacted by the ramifications of their loved one going missing, resulting in a failure to recognise their subsequent support needs. Alternatively, it may be that those around them – family, caregivers, peers or service providers – are at a loss to know how to begin to respond to a young person (Davies, 2012; Families & Friends of Missing Persons, 2012a). Parents and caregivers report that they struggle to explain or respond to the questions young people ask about missingness and the missing person, admitting that they, too, struggle to understand and make sense of what is happening (Davies, 2012). Parents and caregivers may be challenged by their own feelings of shock, loss and grief, leading to further difficulties in responding to others, including young people (Bocknek et al., 2009). It is sometimes assumed that children and young people are not impacted when a loved one is missing in the same way that adults might be, and that they continue on with their lives much as they did prior to their loved one going missing (Families & Friends of Missing Persons, 2016a). There may be little recognition of their feelings and the difficulties resulting from the loss of their missing loved one.

## **Developmental Perspectives**

Examining the psychosocial experience of adults certainly assists in beginning to understand the little-explored experience of young people. To more fully understand the young person's experience, it is important to explore the context in which this experience unfolds and the powerful influence of developmental perspectives and attachment. The young people in this study fall into what has been described as a 'transitional developmental period between childhood and adulthood' (Holmbeck, 2002, p. 409), a life stage characterised by significant change, which includes biological, psychological, and social role changes (Millstein & Litt, 1990). A developmental perspective takes into consideration the multiple, interpersonal contexts of family, peers, school, and work (Berk, 2000; Holmbeck & Shapera, 1999).

Boss, Bryant and Mancini (2017) describe ambiguous loss as a relational phenomenon where a previous attachment to the one who is missing becomes a prerequisite for the experience of loss. The research locates the young person in the midst of family relationships surrounded by peers and wider social networks. An ecological systems lens or approach offers a framework through which to examine the experiences and relationships of individuals within their communities and wider society (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). Such an approach affords recognition that when an important attachment is broken in the young person's world there are impacts not only for the individual but also throughout the system, with the potential to affect

family, peers, schooling, and social interactions. The current research recognises the importance of viewing the young person in the context of these multiple environments, or ecological systems, in an attempt to better understand development, both psychosocial and emotional (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; 1989).

For young people, adolescence requires adjustment to anticipated developmental changes – the onset of puberty, psychological/cognitive development and social redefinition (Holmbeck & Shapera, 1999). The occurrence of unexpected or unanticipated changes, especially those associated with experiences of trauma and loss, have the potential to cause disruption and distress and dramatically affect developmental and health outcomes, in both positive and negative directions (Andriessen et al., 2018; Holmbeck, 2002).

Adult and peer social supports mitigate the impact of trauma following a loss experience (Nickerson et al., 2009), with emotionally ‘present’ parents and other caregivers having the potential to positively impact outcomes for young people. While parental relationships continue to be significant in this developmental stage, identification with peers and a sense of belonging and connection with others outside of the family are also important (Balk, 2014; Families & Friends of Missing Persons, 2016a). In order to meet the developmental milestones or tasks of adolescence – namely, psychosocial adjustment, achievement, autonomy, identity, sexuality and identity (Holmbeck et al., 2000) – support from both within and outside the family is vital (Andriessen et al., 2018).

## **Resilience**

Ambiguous loss theory recognises the presence of natural resilience or the capacity to develop resilience in individuals and families (Boss, 2006). Resilience is defined as ‘an ability to confront adversity and still find hope and meaning in life’ (Deveson, 2003, p. 6). Resilience becomes a protective factor, its presence suggesting that those left behind can live well and move forward with their lives despite continuing ambiguity (Boss, 2006). Bonanno (2004) provides evidence that resilience is present more often than expected or thought to exist in the experience of loss and trauma and in the process of recovery. When a loss is ambiguous, resilience derives from the ability to tolerate ambiguity while accepting that the truth may never be known (Boss, 2007). The finding of natural resilience and the capacity to develop resilience becomes the way of moving forward.

We cannot get rid of the ambiguity, but we can increase our tolerance of ambiguity. Our therapeutic goals are ... not about closure ... nor do we view unresolved grief as an individual

pathology as in the medical model. The focus on the stress of ambiguity allows us to go beyond symptom treatment to build on people's individual strengths. (Boss, 2006, p. 11)

The majority of people who experience a traumatic loss are resilient (Lemay & Ghazal, 2001), although it is recognised that ambiguous loss presents significant challenges, notably the ability to live with unanswered questions (Boss, 2007). Attig (2001) encourages the acknowledgement of the presence of resilience, asserting that both positive and negative responses to trauma and loss may be disenfranchised. Ammon and Maehr (2008, p. 290) define resilience as 'favourable adjustment despite adversities (or risk factors)'. Risk factors may include situations of danger and high risk, chronic stress or prolonged experience of trauma, with resilience demonstrated by successful adaptation, positive functioning, or competence (Henry, 1999). Gilligan (2000) suggests that resilience is normal development under difficult circumstances, and the concept of resilience offers a different approach that provides the motivation to promote normal development even in persistent adverse circumstances. The resilience literature (Harms, 2015; Mosely et al., 2006; Sapienza & Masten, 2011) demonstrates that meaningful relationships, within and outside the home, can be a protective factor, including for young people who have experienced the trauma of the loss of a missing loved one. The importance of a secure base, a sense of belonging within a supportive social network, and warm, responsive relationships are key components in the presence of resilience (Gilligan, 2000).

Boss (2006) refers to the experience of missingness as a relational disorder, with the potential for relationships, within and outside of the family, to be fractured by continuing uncertainty and boundary ambiguity. The availability of protective factors at all levels within the system, ranging from the individual to the community, assists in the promotion of psychosocial resilience in young people (Doty, 2010). Protective factors that assist young people in coping with the impact of a loved one going missing and that promote resilience include secure and close relationships, including parental involvement or a close relationship with at least one adult (Andriessen et al., 2018; Doty, 2010; Garmezy, 1983). Outside of the family, protective factors include positive role models and the ability to access support for both parents and young people, helping to promote the development and presence of resilience (Boss et al., 2003; Garmezy, 1983). At the community level, effective schools, ties to pro-social organisations and good emergency and support services are identified as requisite for the emergence of resilience. Shalev and Ben-Asher (2011) have shown that the resilience of the remaining supports in a family group is very important when someone is absent from the

family. This is relevant for young people living with missingness, where the capacity of parents and carers to respond to their support needs may be challenged by the ambiguity of the situation. The need for awareness, knowledge and ‘health literacy’ (Dunsmore, 2002, p. 26) cannot be overstated. Providing information to family members and service providers to increase awareness and understanding of the impact on and support needs of young people will help to make these conversations less difficult for those who support them. The way a parent or carer copes with ambiguous loss has the potential to influence the risk of trauma in young people (Nickerson et al., 2009), thus reinforcing the need for parents and carers to be adequately informed and supported. Using young people as consultants to inform not only other young people, parents, and carers but also the wider community needs to be encouraged if young people are to receive the support they need (Families & Friends of Missing Persons, 2012a).

### **Recognising the Support Needs of Young People**

Young people matter too. We want to know what’s happening. (Young person, personal communication, July 2012)

How do I explain it to her when I struggle to explain it to myself? (Parent, personal communication, April 2012)

When a young person experiences the loss of someone with whom they share an emotional bond, access to and provision of social support is recognised as being associated with positive grief outcomes. The importance of such positive outcomes, derived from adult and peer social support for young people following a loss or traumatic event, cannot be overstated (Dunsmore, 2002), with social support being found to be associated with more positive outcomes (Andriessen et al., 2018). The importance of preparing young people for an anticipated loss, and providing psychological support when that loss occurs, is recognised in the literature (e.g., Brewer & Sparkes, 2011; Christ, Siegel, & Christ, 2002). While preparation for an unanticipated event, such as a loved one going missing, is impossible, Boss (2002a, p. 40) reinforces the importance of ensuring young people are not overlooked, stating: ‘Secrets and silence are especially confusing to children, and without intervention will eventually cause anxiety and depression’. Boss et al. (2003) show that with family and community support those impacted by ambiguous loss and trauma were able to recover and move forward with their lives by drawing on resilience to find meaning and hope despite the absence of any resolution.



Andriessen et al. (2018) identify a range of supports in their research into the help-seeking experiences of adolescents. These were identified as formal support, informal support and school-related support. Formal psychological support included outpatient or community-based services. Informal support referred to support or church groups, and school-based support included school counsellors.

While the importance of support for young people is acknowledged, the reality appears to be that young people often report that the social support they receive is insufficient, and that service providers can be ill-informed and limited in availability (Ringler & Hayden, 2000). Nickerson et al. (2009) found that young people who are unsupported are more likely to experience ongoing trauma. Lack of social support (Thornton, Robertson, & Mlecko, 1991), personal acknowledgement and/or recognition by mental health professionals can result in support needs remaining unaddressed and therefore being more likely to impede moving forward, which may lead to more negative outcomes. Andriessen et al. (2018) report that bereaved adolescents experienced a reciprocal lack of understanding within their social environment, with relationships becoming more troubled or avoidant, further hindering help-seeking. Clark (2006) also found that the support needs of young people living with missingness appeared to have been largely overlooked. While young people affected by the loss of a missing loved one deserve recognition and have a right to be informed about events that directly involve them, this is often not the reality (Clark, 2006; United Nations Human Rights, 1990).

Young people have very clearly articulated their desire to be told the truth about a loved one being missing (Families & Friends of Missing Persons, 2016a), and may become mistrustful or suspicious if they feel the truth is being withheld (Davies, 2013). The experience of a loved one going missing causes much speculation. When the truth is withheld, this speculation may escalate, with young people drawing their own conclusions, sometimes far worse than the known reality (Subbotsky, 2010).

The challenge for parents and carers is in knowing how to involve, inform, and support a young person in their care, while protecting them from the emotional distress and disruption that follow a loved one going missing (Families & Friends of Missing Persons, 2013a). For family members and service providers, knowing how to talk to and support young people can be both confronting and challenging (Families & Friends of Missing Persons, 2013a). Questions and conversations may be discouraged or avoided (Davies, 2012) for fear of making the situation more difficult (Clark, 2006), or because the adult may fear becoming too upset themselves to maintain their composure (Davies, 2012). Bocknek et al. (2009) suggest that

parents attempting to deal with their own experience of ambiguous loss are at risk of becoming emotionally unavailable to their young person(s). This indicates there is a need for parents to be adequately supported by service providers familiar with the dynamics of ambiguous loss, to enable them to support young people in their care (Davies, 2012).

### **Support Groups – Young People Connecting with Others**

Recovery after trauma requires the opportunity to reconnect with others and engage in meaningful activity (Herman, 1992). Those most able to understand the young person's experience of missingness are those whose situation and experience is similar (Fine et al., 1991).

Brewer and Sparkes (2010) identified factors that helped young people cope with parental bereavement, many similar to those identified by young people living with missingness. These included finding ways to establish rapport and express emotion, permission to have fun, identifying areas of competence and strength, and dealing with the impact on family and social relationships (Murray, Toth, & Clinkinbeard, 2005). A space where children can be heard, come together to speak of shared experiences and feelings and interact with others without having to be mindful of distressing parents or carers has been found to be helpful in supporting young people to cope with bereavement (Families & Friends of Missing Persons, 2016a; Scaletti & Hocking, 2010).

Support groups for young people living with other types of ambiguous loss – including sibling abduction, parental separation, and divorce – have identified personal struggles and dynamics not dissimilar to those reported by young people who live with missingness, including feelings of isolation and of being overwhelmed and forgotten (Schuurman, 2002; Subbotsky, 2010). Support groups provide a place to ask questions and voice painful thoughts, and they reinforce the realisation for young people that they are not alone in their loss, thus reducing feelings of isolation (Dunsmore, 2002; Schuurman, 2002). Bonanno (2001) suggests that while it should be possible to express negative emotions, positive expressions such as laughter can be used as a distraction from distress and may actually help to improve functioning. Boss (2008, p. 20) reinforces this suggestion, stating that '[w]ith anger and frustration acknowledged, normalized – and sometimes even laughed at due to the absurdity of the situation, the tension following ambiguous loss is lowered to a manageable level'.

The use of narrative and storytelling has been widely recognised as helpful in supporting adults and young people to address issues of grief and loss (Boss et al., 2003; Scaletti &

Hocking, 2010; Schuurmann, 2002). Boss et al. (2003) examine the interventions offered to families, including children and young people, following the terrorist attacks of 9/11 (which resulted in the death of many and in others remaining missing), paying particular attention to the efficacy of responses and interventions offered to address the needs of these families. A range of interventions, including family group meetings and involving young people in art therapy and storytelling, reinforced the importance of supporting and including young people following traumatic events. Giving young people permission to speak about their experience of loss and to have it acknowledged was also recognised as beneficial. The therapeutic task in working with those left behind is defined as encouraging the sharing of differing perceptions, encouraging tolerance of difference and ensuring there is a space for all, including young people, to express the many emotions that follow such a traumatic loss, including anger, fear, hope, helplessness, and ambivalence (Boss, 2002a).

Schuurman (2002) expands on the value of storytelling, emphasising the importance of the story being heard, of recognising young people as ‘experts’ in their own experience and of giving them the opportunity to connect and share with others. Glasscock (2006) emphasises the importance of listening to the stories of the families of missing people, involving all within the family to share their stories and their perceptions, even when they differ, and providing a space that allows families to bring missing loved into the present (Harari, 2013; Sigvarsdotter, 2013). Young people report feeling isolated and alone in their experience of a loved one going missing; of wanting their experience recognised and acknowledged by those who ‘get it’, that is, those who understand their situation (Families & Friends of Missing Persons, 2013a; Hoh, 2013). Connecting and interacting with others, of different ages but in similar situations, has been found to be helpful in normalising and affirming individual reactions (Families & Friends of Missing Persons, 2012c; Malone, 2012; Scaletti & Hocking, 2010). Another concern expressed by young people is that displays of happiness might be interpreted as lack of caring or suggestive of having forgotten the missing person (Families & Friends of Missing Persons, 2013a). Young people speak of being able to ask questions and to be themselves in a safe, supportive environment, without fear of upsetting their parents, grandparents or others in the family (Families & Friends of Missing Persons, 2012a). The benefits of this separate space cannot be overestimated. While Moody and Moody (1991) stress the importance of maintaining the remaining familial connections following a loss. Boss et al. (2003) reinforce the idea of young people participating in their own way and having the freedom to be a part of the support that is offered to the family group, as well as being apart from it, in a space that is theirs alone.

## **In the Loop**

In 2010, the FFMPU in NSW received funding to establish a support group program for families, bringing together family members and friends whose shared experience is of having a missing loved one. Group participants share their personal experience of living with missingness, sometimes for the first time; exchange ideas about what is helpful and what is not; and to offer and receive support from others in finding ways for living with missingness (Gitterman, 2006; Shulman, 2011). Prior to In the Loop, support group meetings had been geared towards adult family members and friends of missing people. Support group meetings continue to the current day, with family members and friends attending as often as they choose in city and regional areas.

Debra, a participant in this research, was one of the first young people to be directly referred to FFMPU for support; however, she was not one of the first whose support needs were flagged by an adult. Adult support group meeting topics of discussion often related to parental concerns about how best to respond to and support the young people in their family. As the parents of young people engaged with the FFMPU team, developing trust based on their own interactions with the team, they began to explore the ways FFMPU might support the young people in their family or community. Out of these discussions came the decision to facilitate a support group for young people living with the loss of a missing loved one.

The young people worked with the facilitators to name the support group 'In the Loop', encapsulating their wishes in terms of inclusion within the information and support loop in their family when a loved one is a missing person. Young people who attended In the Loop chose to share a part of their story with each other and the group co-facilitators. In doing so, they revealed untold and unrecognised experiences of trauma, grief, and loss. They also revealed profound insight, compassion for others, resilience and humour in the midst of, and despite, their loss. These young people later welcomed the opportunity to participate in this research.

## **Summary**

This chapter demonstrated that this research is underpinned by strong and appropriate theories related to experiences of trauma, grief, and loss. Given the dearth of primary research and literature pertaining specifically to the psychosocial experience of young people when a loved one is a missing person, it was necessary to review the literature from a perspective that looked beyond the experience of young people living with the loss of a missing loved one.

Hence, theories relevant to the experience of trauma and ambiguous loss in the lives of adults and communities were also examined. Finally, the chapter provided an overview of the response to missing people and to those left behind, while considering the implications of a systemic response to young people who have experienced trauma and loss. The following chapter presents an explanation of the nature of the problem being addressed, the overarching aims and specific research questions for each of the studies, and the rationale for them.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **AIMS, RESEARCH QUESTIONS, AND THEIR RATIONALE**

#### **Introduction**

The present investigation focuses on young people whose loved one is a long-term missing person, analysing their psychosocial experience and support needs from the time of learning that their loved one is missing, and examining the response of parents, caregivers and service providers across the various systems in which young people interact. The purpose of this chapter is to present the nature of the problem being addressed, the overarching aims and specific research questions and the rationale for each research question in the context of extant theory, research, and current practice.

#### **The Problem**

Young people who experience the loss of a missing loved one receive little attention or recognition in research, literature or practice. They are often ‘invisible’ in investigations and media coverage, and in the recognition of support needs. It is sometimes assumed that young people continue as they did prior to their loved one going missing, or that this lack of attention is, in some instances, for their own protection. Other explanations might be that the impact of a loved one going missing and the resultant need for support are not recognised, or that those in their family and community network are at a loss and ill-prepared to respond to them (Davies, 2012). Whatever the reason, the invisibility of young people is a significant problem when the outcome is that young people are neither offered nor receive support. Service providers report that at times they feel similarly unprepared and ill-equipped in knowing how to respond to distressed family members, a problem that becomes more difficult when young people are present within the family unit. It is, therefore, timely that the present investigation undertakes an in-depth study of the experience and resultant psychosocial support needs of young people, providing direction for those within their family, community, and social systems.

## **Research Aims**

The overarching aims of the research are to contribute to conceptual advances in research and practice in understanding the experience of young people whose loved one is a long-term missing person. More specifically, the research aims to:

- develop and promote an understanding of the experience of young people when a loved one is missing, including an understanding of the impact of missing, the psychosocial support needs of young people, and the way these support needs are acknowledged and responded to by parents, carers, and service providers;
- describe the role of parents in responding to the support needs of young people; and
- identify and inform best practice in responding to young people and those who support them when someone is missing.

In examining these issues, this research further explicates the experiences not only of young people impacted by the loss of a missing loved one, but also of parents and caregivers of young people, and of service providers who come in contact with those who live with ambiguous loss and who may be in a position of offering support to those left behind.

## **Statement of Research Questions and Rationale**

The research comprises three studies, identified as Studies 1, 2 and 3. Research questions for each of the studies were framed to gain insights first and foremost into the experiences of young people and how others within their networks – parents, caregivers and a range of service providers – recognised and supported them. As a secondary aim, the research questions were framed to gain insights into the information, support and service delivery/training needs of those within the young people’s networks. Given the dearth of research pertaining specifically to the experience and psychosocial support needs of young people living with the loss of a missing loved one, hypotheses were not formulated with a view to predicting the directionality of impacts based on previous research and literature. The research questions were formulated specifically to address the aims of the study and allow for in-depth analysis of the rich data derived from individual lived experiences for both those left behind and the service providers ‘meeting’ them.

### **Study 1 Research Questions and Rationale**

The research questions for Study 1 are as follows.

- What is the experience for a young person when someone they care about is a missing person?
- How does the young person describe the impact of missingness on themselves and their family?
- What is the experience of young people living with the loss of a missing person when they seek support?

### ***The rationale***

Study 1 focuses on a sample of young people who has had a long-term missing person in their lives. To obtain greater depth of information, two groups were invited to participate. The first group was young people up to 20 years of age at the time of interview, and the second, adults who, as young people up to 20 years of age, had experienced the loss of a missing loved one. The interviews sought to provide a thorough exploration of individual lived experiences through the eyes of those directly affected. Both groups were asked to reflect on their experience as a young person from the time their loved one became a missing person. Because some adults were reflecting on a time long past, this offered a greater opportunity to reflect on their experiences over a longer period.

### **Study 2 Research Questions and Rationale**

The research questions for Study 2 are as follows.

- What is the experience of parents who are supporting a young person living with missingness?
- How do parents and carers inform and support the young people in their care?
- What are the concerns of parents and carers supporting young people?

### ***The rationale***

Study 2 focuses on a sample of parents who were caring for a young person at the time of the young person's loved one going missing; exploring the parent's response to the information and support needs of their young person. The interview questions were also designed to identify the information and support needs of parents who were required to inform, respond to and support one or more young people while managing their own feelings of grief and loss.



## **Study 3 Research Questions and Rationale**

The research questions for Study 3 are as follows.

- How do service providers recognise and understand the support needs of young people when a loved one is missing?
- How do service providers respond to young people who are living with the loss of a missing person?

### ***The rationale***

Study 3 focuses on the response of service providers who identify as having contact with and providing support to those left behind when a loved one is a missing person, including individuals, families, and young people. Service providers within the missing persons' sector and/or those who came into contact with those left behind, of any age, when a loved one was a missing person were invited to respond to the survey in the hope of reaching as many as possible. As an insider researcher, I was aware that the number of service providers having contact with young people who have a missing loved one is limited (see Chapter 4, p.62)

### **Summary**

The problem addressed in this research and explained here and in Chapter 2 underscores the fact that there is a significant gap in the missing persons research specifically regarding the experience of young people living with the loss of a missing person. In the light of this gap, the present research is significant and will make an important contribution to research, practice and policy in the provision of psychosocial support for young people within the missing persons sector. This chapter presented the statement of the problem, the aims of the research, the research questions and the rationale for them. The following chapter presents and describes the methodology used to successfully investigate the research questions and meet the aims of the studies.

# **CHAPTER 4**

## **THE METHODOLOGY**

### **Introduction**

This chapter presents the overarching methodology used to address the specific research questions stated in Chapter 3. The research aimed to explore and understand the experience of young people, and the response of parents, carers, and service providers to young people when a loved one is missing is explained. The chapter provides a rationale for the chosen qualitative research methodology and the underlying theoretical constructs which shaped the data collection and thematic analysis. An explanation is also provided of the participants, inclusion criteria, and recruitment strategies. A detailed description of the characteristics of the participants within each of the studies, and of ethical issues for consideration, is then provided.

The chapter finishes with an explanation of my position as an insider/researcher and my personal and professional experience. This is done because I believe it is important to give an explanation of my early clinical practice as a social worker, and my transition from clinical practice in the areas of trauma and loss to practitioner and then researcher in the missing persons sector.

This research is set in the individual and shared stories of young people who struggle, as people of all ages do, to understand and make sense of the experience of a loved one going missing. The methodology selected facilitates the sharing of stories that assist others within families, communities, and service providers to recognise and understand the experience and psychosocial support needs of young people when a loved one is a missing person. Hence, I include the story of Rob at the end of the chapter to better explain the use of the methodology.

### **The Research Design**

This research seeks to uncover new information in the form of personal narratives and survey responses from three distinct but contextually closely related groups. The groups are: young people and those who were young at the time that their loved one went missing; parents of young people where the young person has had a loved one missing from their life; and service providers who have contact with families or young people when a loved one is missing. The research examines the social phenomenon of missingness from the perspective of the young people left behind, rather than focusing on the missing persons population and examining

typologies, predicting outcomes or measuring prevalence (Boeije, 2010). The data is humanised (Elliott & Timulak, 2005) through the personal narratives of each of the participants.

From the outset, and in keeping with my social work training and professional experience, I sought a method that would enable individual participants to tell their personal stories in a respectful space and provide a framework within which to analyse the data obtained. As a social worker, I intervene with individuals and families, not in isolation but, rather, systemically, within both social and cultural contexts. In this investigation, I use an ecological systems approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1989), which places the young person within the context of multiple environments – from home and family to the wider school system to the community and, more broadly, society and culture – while acknowledging that each system interacts with and influences the others in every aspect of the young person's life.

To understand their lived experiences, it was necessary to use a methodology that allowed the participants – young people and parents – to tell their stories freely and safely, and for service providers to be able to comment with as little or as much detail as they chose. I therefore selected an approach grounded in qualitative methodology. Adams suggests, this method is useful in under-researched topics (as the topic of this research most certainly is) and where the motivation is to 'explore the in-depth experiences of participants and the meanings they attribute to these experiences' ((2010, p. 17). Liamputtong and Ezzy (2000) and Minichiello, Aroni, and Hays (2008) reinforce this statement, adding that such a methodology also facilitates the study and understanding of how people organise their lives, and the way actions and behaviour are influenced by their life experiences.

A qualitative methodology is congruent with the social work values of self-determination, ethical practice and empowerment of the individual and the community (AASW, 2010; Reamer, 2018). These values combine with the qualitative research design to enable participants to find their voices and articulate their individual lived experiences. This led me to choose semi-structured in-depth interviews with a narrative focus as the most appropriate and empowering method for revealing individual rich, complex, and unique experiences.

Padgett (1998) further supports a qualitative approach in the following situations.

- Where the topic is little understood.
- Where the topic may evoke an emotional or uncomfortable response in the participant, which requires increased sensitivity on the part of the researcher.
- Where a quantitative methodology does not sufficiently explain the experience of the participants.

## **A Phenomenological Approach**

An interpretive phenomenological approach to this research was deemed to be the most sensitive and effective to capture both the wholeness and the essence (Moustakas, 1994) of the experience of young people living with the loss of a missing person in the context of ambiguous loss. This research approach was selected over a narrative study approach because it enabled a better understanding of the common and shared experiences for young people of the phenomenon of missing persons and ambiguous loss, rather than describing the singular experience of individuals (Creswell, 2013). Specifically, an interpretive phenomenological approach sought to move beyond description of individual experiences of young people and, instead, to examine the relationship and connection of young people to the world around them and to look for the meaning embedded within their experience (Rodriguez & Smith, 2018).

The spoken word has been used the world over, for many thousands of years, to pass on language, wisdom, culture, and tradition (Boyd, 2010). Storytelling has allowed people of all ages, across time, to pass on learning and to make sense of human experiences, through the construction and reconstruction of their personal stories (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Stories have been shared in different places, spaces, and times, in conversations and reflections and in research spaces such as this one. The word ‘narrative’ is often used synonymously with ‘description’, ‘history’ or ‘story’. A narrative may contain shared knowledge and facts, but it may just as easily contain individual and different understandings and interpretations of similar events.

In this research, young people told individual stories, of their past and their present, and reflected on and made meaning of their experiences over time (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). Family members, peers, service providers and, importantly, missing loved ones formed the supporting cast of their stories (Gergen & Gergen, 1984) as they spoke of those both present and absent, and the place of those absent within their stories. While missing loved ones continue to play an important part in the lives of young people, the unfolding narrative recognises their physical absence and psychological presence. For young people, their individual narratives are set in familial and community contexts. In my work with those left behind I have worked and walked alongside young people and their families, and in this research, in engaging with participants, I am walking into the midst of their stories (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006).

The research utilised an in-depth, exploratory approach, which afforded me a high degree of flexibility and independence regarding the research design and the data collection. Two

methods were employed to elicit individual narratives and responses from those involved: semi-structured interviews and a survey questionnaire. These two methods of data collection allowed for triangulation, in terms of method and data source, thus ensuring a rich description and comprehensive understanding of the experience of young people and the phenomenon of missingness (Patton, 1999). Semi-structured interviews employing a phenomenological approach to storytelling together with the use of a survey questionnaire enabled method triangulation, while participants – who differed in terms of age, perspective, relationship to others within the studies and to the missing person and in their personal and professional roles – enabled data source triangulation (Bekhet & Zauszniewski, 2012; Carter et al., 2014; Patton, 1999).

## **Rationale for Chosen Methodology**

Until quite recently, there has been little research into a most significant part of the missing persons phenomenon – the lived experience of those left behind when a loved one is missing. Greater attention had been given to research that examined, quantified, and described the missing persons phenomenon, with researchers relying on quantitative methodologies to examine the demographics of the missing persons population (Bricknell & Renshaw, 2016; Henderson & Henderson, 1998). However, the need for a more inclusive and holistic approach – moving beyond the demographics of who, where, why, and how many people go missing – has prompted an increasing focus on qualitative methodological research. Hjelmeland and Knizek (2010) observed that to reveal the bigger picture and to understand the human experience, a move beyond quantitative research is necessary. Therefore, by using a qualitative methodology with an emphasis on phenomenological enquiry, the ‘subjective human experience’ (Lopez & Willis, 2004, p. 726) of young people whose loved one is a missing person is examined. Through examining their lived experience, their psychosocial support needs are identified.

Australian researchers have been at the forefront of qualitative research in the study of missing persons and, more recently, a greater focus on the experience of those left behind has emerged. For example, Clark (2006) studies the sibling experience of ambiguous loss and the response of siblings with a missing loved one. Glasscock (2011) studies the lived experience of families of missing people, and Wayland (2015) the exploration of hope for those left behind. Each of these studies is framed within a context of ambiguous loss, which is the theoretical context that also underpins this current research. Boss (1999), the principal exponent of ambiguous loss theory, researches and writes extensively about the experience of those left

behind, at times acknowledging the presence of young people in the context of family and community, predominantly in the USA. However, no researcher in Australia or internationally has specifically asked young people about their experience; neither have parents nor service providers been asked about their experience of responding to and supporting young people affected by the loss of a missing person.

A qualitative methodology using a phenomenological approach allows the human experience in all of its richness to be revealed (Haydon, Browne, & van der Riet, 2018; Wang & Geale, 2016). Such an approach affords a more meaningful insight into, and understanding of, the experience of those left behind when a loved one is missing, and of the meaning each makes of their individual experiences.

### **Semi-structured Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews were selected for Studies 1 and 2, in order to explore the unique and often complex experiences of young people and those who care for them who live with the loss of a missing person. I invited young people and adults who were young at the time their loved one went missing, and parents of young people, to participate in face-to-face semi-structured interviews. Interview questions in Study 1 were designed to seek information about the context in which events unfolded for the young person, their relationship with the missing person and their experience of what happened after their loved one went missing. In Study 2, the interview questions were designed to obtain information from parents about their experience of informing and supporting their young person when a loved one went missing. The interview space allowed each participant to tell their story freely and in their own words, to speak of their lived experience, perceptions and constructions of reality and the meaning they made of their experience. (Glasscock, 2011; Minichiello et al., 2008). The interview questions for Study 1 are located in Appendix 2 and Study 2 in Appendix 3.

### **The Survey Questionnaire**

Study 3 employed an anonymous online survey questionnaire. The questionnaire sought information from service providers about their awareness and understanding of the experience and support needs of young people with a missing loved one. The survey questionnaire for Study 3 is located in Appendix 4.

The questionnaire used both closed and open-ended questions. Questions were formulated for the questionnaire based on the research questions for Study 3. A paper copy was available and provided if requested. The survey questionnaire was initially pilot-tested using

two social work students completing work experience in the missing persons sector, two members of the FFMPU team, and two PhD supervisors. Based on their feedback with regard to clarity and comprehensibility, adjustments were made to ensure the questions were clear and evoked truthful answers. The service providers targeted were from within and outside the missing persons sector. From within, they comprised service providers from government and non-government organisations, charities, and investigators/police – that is, those who work with family members and friends when a loved one is missing. From outside the missing persons sector, target respondents were support services working with a range of people not necessarily presenting with having a missing loved one as the primary reason for presentation – for example, housing and accommodation services, youth workers, and school counsellors.

## **Ethical Issues**

Ethical issues were carefully considered in designing and implementing this research. Qualitative research is underpinned by ethical issues and considerations, as is my practice as an Accredited Mental Health Social Worker. This research was designed according to best practice ethical standards. All participants were informed of the nature of the research and its intended uses (see Appendix 1) and provided written consent (see Appendix 5). An application to the Human Research Ethics Committee at Australian Catholic University was submitted and the research was granted ethics approval (registration number 2015-190H) (see Appendix 8).

At the commencement of this research, I was employed within the NSW missing persons sector as the Coordinator of the Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit (FFMPU), NSW Department of Justice. Prior to commencement of the research I sought permission and obtained written confirmation of support from my manager, the Commissioner of Victims' Rights, to undertake the research study. To avoid any potential conflict of interest, I established and maintained a clear delineation between my role as Coordinator of FFMPU and my role as researcher. From the outset of the research process all participants were informed of my employment within the NSW Department of Justice and my role as a PhD student researcher with the Institute for Positive Psychology and Education at Australian Catholic University.

I began the semi-structured interviews with an awareness of the potential level of vulnerability of each participant – young person or adult – and sought to ensure that each person was well-informed and aware of the consequences of their decision to participate and their options for support. The interview process was intended to be empowering for each participant, enabling them to exercise both choice and control. In the introductory phase of the research, young people and their parents and carers were advised of the availability and referral options

for counselling and mental health support (if they required it) from qualified social workers or psychologists both within the FFMPU team and external to the research. Within the Ethics Approval there is a clear requirement that non-participation or withdrawal at any time during the research period would have no impact on future access to counselling or support services offered by FFMPU. This was reiterated to participants during the recruitment process and prior to the commencement of each interview. Participants were also made aware that their individual information was confidential, securely stored, and password protected. All data have been de-identified, with pseudonyms used to differentiate individual narratives.

The need for anonymity, or at least control over how much the individual chooses to reveal his/her identity and individual circumstances, remains important for those who live with missingness. The public narrative of those left behind is one over which they may sometimes have little control in terms of when and how their missing loved one is revealed to the public. Investigators, the media, and the community may all be instrumental in revealing the public narrative – a narrative that is often focused around the investigation, the facts of the disappearance and details of the missing person. This public narrative often receives attention for only a short time in the public arena, until public interest, often media-generated, wanes.

The private narrative of those left behind, as this research reveals, is often the untold experience. For the families of missing people, and especially young people, their experience is often not recognised, asked about or considered relevant, except if deemed newsworthy. The private narrative may be held tightly by those who own it and revealed only when considered safe to do so, if at all. Those who are left behind express a protectiveness of, and loyalty to, the missing person and others within their network. They may be fiercely protective of the missing person's personal and health details; their history and their identity being revealed. As such, the ethical methodology chosen in this research needed to reassure participants that their identity, their missing person's identity and their privacy are both respected and maintained.

## **Recruitment Strategies**

The FFMPU client mailing list, the FFMPU social media page and the researcher's LinkedIn profile page were all used to raise awareness of, and alert potential participants to, the research and the different studies that comprise the research. This meant that participants were potentially drawn from both within the FFMPU database and externally. The FFMPU interagency mailing list and a mailing list comprising services in the government and non-government sectors, some with frequent contact and others more remotely located and of



unknown frequency of contact within the missing persons sector, were compiled and emailed to introduce the research and, more specifically, the survey questionnaire.

In seeking participants in Studies 1 and 2, thirty-nine families on the FFMPU mailing list and database were identified as having young people present within, or as having been a young person up to 20 years of age when their loved one went missing. These families and individuals were initially emailed a brief description and a link to a full explanation of the research, which included Participant Information Sheets and Consent Forms (see Appendices 2 and 6). Participants were recruited using purposeful sampling, which, according to Patton (2015) enables the researcher to select information-rich cases from which issues of central importance to the research can be learned.

In this cohort of thirty-nine, each was identified as a current or past parent or carer of a young person in a family where a loved one is missing, or as an adult who had experienced the loss of a missing loved one as a young person. In all instances the young person was known to one or more members of the FFMPU team, including me, and had initially become known to the FFMPU team via their parent(s). The adult participants who were young people at the time of missing were known to one or more members of the FFMPU team, having individually initiated contact with the FFMPU team prior to the commencement of the research. In Studies 1 and 2, this prior contact with the FFMPU team had variously been face to face, via email or social media, or through attendance at an FFMPU or other agency's missing persons event.

The recruitment strategy for participants for the survey questionnaire differed from Studies 1 and 2. The FFMPU website, the FFMPU Facebook page (of which I was a moderator at the time) and my LinkedIn professional page were used to introduce and explain the nature and purpose of the research and included a link to the survey questionnaire. Invitations to participate were posted with introductions. To give potential participants deeper understanding of my proposed research a YouTube link to my Confirmation of Candidature presentation was also included in the LinkedIn survey invitation.

Respondents were sought from within and external to the missing persons sector. Email and online notifications using social media were the first points of contact. Discussions occurred at FFMPU Interagency meetings with NSW (State) Police, Australian Federal Police and non-government agencies in attendance; however, none of those who responded to the survey questionnaire identified as having learned of the research via this channel.

Upon receipt of an interested response via email, a follow-up phone call was made to potential participants. The desired sample size of five young people and five adults who were

young people at the time their loved one went missing was achieved after the first mail-out and follow-up phone call. The following section will explain how the participants were selected.

## **Inclusion Criteria**

Inclusion criteria for participation in Study 1 included the following: (a) young people up to 20 years of age at the time of interview; (b) adults who were up to 20 years of age at the time their loved one went missing; (c) the missing person is a family member or someone identified as relationally close (not necessarily biologically related) to the young person; (d) the missing person is classified as a long-term missing person – that is, reported to state police as a missing person and remained missing for more than three months, according to the Australian Federal Police definition; and (e) participants are available to be interviewed face to face, meaning they are residents of, and in NSW, Australia, during the ethics-approved data collection period at the time of interview. There was no requirement in terms of the age of the young person, other than being 20 years of age or younger at the time their loved one went missing.

In Study 3, the survey questionnaire, the inclusion criteria for Studies 1 and 2 did not apply. The only inclusion criteria for Study 3 was an interest in or interaction with young people or families with a link to a missing persons experience.

## **Characteristics of Participants**

### **Study 1**

The ten participants in Study 1 were aged up to 20 years at the time their loved one went missing; however, they were differentiated, based on their age at the time of interview, as Group 1a – young people up to 20 years, and Group 1b – adults more than 20 years of age. This meant that the Group 1a participants were young people within the definition of a young person at the time of interview, while those in Group 1b were of an age that situated outside of the young person age group (see Definition of Key Terms, p. vi).

Group 1a contained five young people – three females and two males, aged from 14 to 19 years. Their loved ones had been missing between two-and-a-half and 14 years at time of interview. At the time their loved one went missing, their ages ranged from four to 12 years of age. Two of the young people are siblings, a brother and sister. The remainder are unrelated to the other participants in Group 1a. All of the participants in Group 1a are children of participants in Study 2. Four of the five young people had extensive prior face-to-face contact

with the FFMPU. The other young person had accessed telephone counselling with an FFMPU team member.

Group 1b contained five adult women who were up to 20 years of age at the time their loved one went missing. At time of interview they were aged between 22 and 53 years, and their loved one had been missing between eight and 43 years, at time of interview. At the time that their loved one went missing, the young people’s ages ranged from 13 to 20 years. Each of the five participants had some prior contact, either face-to-face or via telephone, with one or more members of the FFMPU team. The characteristics of research participants in Study 1, Groups 1a and 1b are described in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1  
*Characteristics of Research Participants in Study 1*

Characteristic	Group 1a	Group 1b
Age Range at Interview (gender)	14–19 years (3 females, 2 males)	22– 53 years (5 females)
Age Range at Time of Missing	4–12 years	13–20 years
Relationship to missing person	Sibling, child, niece	Sibling, cousin, child
Length of time missing of loved one	2.5–14 years	8–43 years

## Study 2

In Study 2, eight parents of young people who were up to 20 years of age at the time their loved one went missing were interviewed. Each parent was caring for a young person at the time their loved one went missing. One parent of five young people, and both parents of another young person in Study 1, were interviewed. The characteristics of Study 2 research participants are described in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2  
*Characteristics of Research Participants in Study 2*

Characteristic	Specifics
Gender	7 females, 1 male
Relationship to young person	8 biological parents
Relationship to missing person	2 siblings, ex-partner/wife, 2 siblings, 1 daughter, 2 parents, 1 aunt

### Study 3

In Study 3, the participants were service providers who identified as having contact with or providing support to individuals or families with a missing loved one. Those who participated in Study 3 were drawn from diverse backgrounds, both in professional experience, qualifications, and place of work. From within the missing persons sector, participants were sought from government (Health and Justice services), non-government organisations and charities, i.e. those who worked or came into contact with family members and friends because their loved one is missing. External to the missing persons sector were support services working with a range of people not necessarily presenting with having a missing loved one as the primary reason for presentation (e.g. housing and accommodation services, youth/health workers, school counsellors, and others with a research or academic interest).

#### Approaching participants

Participants were approached in a sensitive, non-judgemental manner, with the understanding that their individual stories continue to be important and are worthy of being told, regardless of how long their loved one has been missing. The potential for distress that participation in the research might evoke was acknowledged at the outset of the recruitment process and again at the time of interview. Ensuring the well-being of participants meant checking in with them about their feelings of comfort and willingness to continue at every stage of the interview process. Stories unfolded as the participants wished them to, at their own pace.

**Study 1:** In Group 1a, young people were not directly approached. An adult known to the young person was the first point of contact. The five young people who participated were recruited via a parent, grandparent, aunt or another family member who was aware of the existence of FFMPU and had prior contact with or had sought support from FFMPU. A common thread around participation in the research interviews was that each young person who indicated a willingness to be interviewed had had individual contact with the FFMPU team prior to commencement of the research. Four of the five young people had attended In the Loop, an FFMPU support group meeting for young people. The one participant who had not attended In the Loop had previously engaged in telephone counselling with a member of the FFMPU team as he resided a considerable distance from Sydney.

In Group 1b, those who were known to have experienced the loss of a missing person as a young person were approached directly. All participants had prior contact with the FFMPU team, ranging from seeking information, support, and counselling for themselves to attending

a missing persons' event hosted or co-hosted by the FFMPU team. All participants but one identified that they had not spoken with a counsellor or a support person at or around the time their loved one went missing. For four of the five participants, the contact with FFMPU as a support service occurred between eight and 40 years after their loved one went missing.

**Study 2:** In Study 2, all eight interviewees were biological parents of young people. All parents had had prior contact with the FFMPU team online, via social media or face to face, with contact varying considerably in terms of frequency and recency. Six of the eight parents had attended one or more support group meetings in metropolitan Sydney or in a regional area, accessing their own emotional or practical support or seeking information or assistance in dealing with some aspect of having a missing loved one. The same six had also accessed one or more individual counselling sessions.

Concern for the young people in their care was identified as an important reason for initiating contact with the FFMPU team. Strategies for talking to and supporting young people were a topic of discussion at a number of support group meetings and in individual meetings. Participants who were familiar with the practice of the FFMPU team and had met one or more members of the team gained familiarity and established trust within clear professional working relationships. This meant that it was possible to begin the interview process without lengthy introductions.

For six of the eight parents, their child was a participant in the research. The parent or parents of the five young people in Study 1a were all interviewed in Study 2. The mothers of four young people and both parents of one young person were interviewed. The mother of one participant in Study 1b also participated in Study 2. For the remaining two parents in Study 2, their children (adolescents in one family and adults in the other) did not participate in Study 1.

## **The Relationship of the Participants to the Missing Person**

In Studies 1 and 2, each of the participants shared a biological relationship with the missing person and, in some instances, with other research participants; for example, one missing person was related to two young people from Study 1a, one from Study 1b and one from Study 2. Where this occurred, they are referred to as family groupings. For the participants in Study 1, the missing person was a parent or grandparent, a biological sibling or an extended family member (uncle, cousin or niece). For the parents in Study 2 the missing person was a partner or ex-partner (married or de facto), a parent, a child (adult or young person), an adult sibling or a niece.

Participants in Study 3 came into contact with or delivered services to those left behind when a loved one is missing. None of them identified as having met the missing person associated with the young person or family with whom they had contact. For service providers who come into contact with those left behind after a loved one has gone missing, this is not unusual.

## **Location of Interviews**

Geographical location, particularly proximity, was a determinant for participation in the face-to-face interviews. All of the research participants in Studies 1 and 2 were residents of the state of NSW or the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), Australia. A small number resided in Sydney, whereas the others lived in regional or rural NSW or Canberra in the ACT. I travelled between 40 and 530 kilometres to interview participants in Studies 1 and 2, to locations that they identified as convenient and comfortable for them. In the case of the young people participating, location was also convenient for the adults on whom the young people were reliant for transport.

Interviews took place in a location near the participant's place of residence, such as a community centre, or, when requested by participants, in their homes. One or more parents accompanied each young person and remained nearby but not within earshot. One young person chose to complete the interview with both parents present during the interview at home. The interviews took place from November 2015 to April 2017, with most completed in the first six months of the data collection period. Two of the later interviews occurred following a request from the participant to postpone the interview for personal reasons.

## **The Interview Process**

In Studies 1 and 2, a single-session face-to-face interview was used to obtain information from young people, adults who were young people at the time the missing person went missing, and parents of young people. Prior to the face-to-face meeting, I had provided participants with the list of interview questions that were designed as a guide for the face-to-face interview.

Prior to each face-to-face research interview, an explanation of the nature of the research, the possibility of participation and any questions arising were completed via telephone. At the beginning of each face-to-face meeting, I reintroduced myself as the researcher, reiterated the purpose and nature of the research and ensured consent forms were signed. This took approximately 30 minutes. I began each audiotaped interview with a similar statement for every participant: 'This research looks at the experience of young people when a loved one is missing.

I would like to hear about your experience of being a young person/a parent of a young person affected by the loss of a missing loved one.’

From the outset of the interview process, I had considered the possibility of working systematically through the interview questions, but from the very first interview that was not the way the interview process unfolded. Once started, participants comfortably took the lead in narrating their individual stories, in their own way and at their own pace. As the researcher, my role became one of careful, empathic, attentive, and appropriately affirming listener to the experience being described.

Participants appeared to be genuinely relaxed, even when recalling and describing events and memories that were at times highly sensitive and potentially distressing. Rich individual narratives emerged, mostly unprompted, after the introduction and initial invitation to tell the story in their own words. When further questions were asked, they served primarily as prompts and as an opportunity to invite additional information or seek clarification if a part of the narrative seemed to require explanation or elaboration (Elliott & Timulak, 2005). Silence, if it occurred, appeared to provide the opportunity for an emotional break or time to think and was quite comfortable. My experience working for many years as a social worker/counsellor, combined with my experience working in the missing persons sector, enabled me to engage comfortably and respond empathically to participants. Working in the missing persons sector, listening to the stories and experiences of family members, friends, and service providers afforded an insight into and facilitated an understanding of the dynamics of missingness and its impact on those left behind. This understanding meant that the interview questions were informed by the observed, and sometimes articulated, experience of those who live with missing.

The face-to-face meeting was planned with the hope that it would be as relaxed as possible. This meant that the interviews were not time-limited, although the interviews were approximately one hour in duration. Interviews in the homes of some participants allowed time for the feeding of babies and sharing of refreshments, as they welcomed me into their homes. In one meeting, planned as a face-to-face interview, the preliminary conversation lasted for more than two hours. The participant in this meeting had had little prior contact with any members of the FFMPU team, even though another member of the same family had been in contact with both me and others from the FFMPU team. The importance of the participant’s backstory, of being able to speak about their lived experience as part of a family impacted by a number of losses, of which the loss of a missing person was but one, was an important precursor to the audiotaping of the interview.

As the interviewer I remained mindful of my own potential for bias, the potential for a power imbalance between myself and each participant, personal and professional boundaries and the need to maintain an objective stance. The semi-structured interviews, which allowed each participant to take the lead, telling the story in their own words and at their own pace, were designed to ensure that none of these concerns became a reality (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Galdas, 2017; Minichiello, Aroni, & Hays, 2008).

I had previously met all, but two, of the participants face to face in my professional capacity as the Coordinator of FFMPU. It is reasonable to suggest that as a result of prior contact with the FFMPU team and me and having been fully and respectfully consulted in discussions prior to consent to participate, the interview space was a comfortable and relaxed one. Participants, who often reflected on how quickly the interview time seemed to pass, confirmed this.

### **Assumptions and Limitations**

As a Department of Justice employee and Coordinator of FFMPU at the time of data collection, I was an active member of the community I was researching – an insider researcher (Patton, 2015; Braun & Clarke, 2013). As a service provider in the missing persons community, having worked directly with many families who had experienced the loss of a missing person, and with service providers in the missing persons sector from government and non-government agencies I was mindful of my position. However, I acknowledge that I have never experienced the loss of a missing family member as the families who participated in this research had.

This difference enabled me to maintain a relatively objective and neutral position, which continues to be of utmost importance. When participants expressed disappointment or frustration in relation to the actions of other service providers in the community, remaining neutral and unbiased was a vitally important, and sometimes challenging, position to maintain. Had I stepped away from a neutral position, I risked aligning myself with a family member, and potentially crossing professional boundaries requiring a non-judgemental view of other professionals in the missing persons sector.

Family members and friends in the missing persons community may live with the loss of a missing loved one for many years. In that time, connections develop between other family members and friends who share similar experiences, and with service providers, such as myself who come into contact with those left behind after a loved one has gone missing. Connections develop with those who are identified as having an understanding of the experience of, and



compassion and empathy for, those left behind. Because the number of service providers in the sector is small and FFMPU is the only government-funded unit providing services to the families of missing people, all of the research participants interviewed had had some contact with me prior to the research. I had previously met the majority of the participants face to face in a professional capacity at individual or family meetings, attendance at missing persons events or support group meetings. For the two participants I had not met face to face, email communications had been exchanged. It is reasonable to suggest that for participants having had prior contact with the researcher and the FFMPU team and having indicated a willingness to participate in the research, this helped to reduce the potential for feelings of uncertainty and anxiety.

Prior knowledge obtained as an insider in the missing persons community has the potential to be both an advantage and a disadvantage. I began this research with an in-depth understanding of working in the missing persons community and of the challenges for those left behind of living with missingness. This understanding assisted me to shape the research questions so as to obtain rich and new knowledge. A potential disadvantage, however, was the risk of assuming knowledge of individual experiences and the responses being provided and missing new or previously undisclosed elements of individual experiences. Conrad and Serlin (2006, p. 502) note that '[t]he problem that the researcher faces, therefore, is not one of how to put aside prior knowledge but rather one of how to capitalize on prior knowledge and use it to extract as much new knowledge as possible from the findings'.

Finally, being a professional working with families prior to and while researching the missing persons community was an advantage. Family members and friends of missing people are all aware of the interest and curiosity with which they are sometimes viewed by the wider community. They are also sometimes sceptical of external researchers coming into their lives and collecting data that may then be used and interpreted by the researcher and disseminated to others who have had little direct experience or contact with those left behind.

### **Thematic Analysis**

Thematic analysis is one of the most popular methods of qualitative analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and has previously been used to identify themes within the context of counselling experiences (MacIntosh & Johnson, 2008). The themes are identified based on their significance to the research questions (Joffe & Yardley, 2003).

The thematic analysis undertaken in this research is inductive. It seeks descriptions of lived experience, rather than theory, and to understand rather than to explain (Woolfe, Dryden, & Strawbridge, 2003). An inductive orientation meant that the data obtained from the semi-structured interviews and the survey questionnaire provided the starting point for identifying meaning and interpreting data (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Participants described their experience with emphasis on the issues that were significant for each of them. The thematic analysis was guided by the six-phase procedure proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The six phases are given in Table 4.3 below.

Table 4.3  
*Phases of Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)*

Phase	Description of the process
1. Gaining familiarity with the data.	Transcription of interview (data), reading and re-reading, noting down initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes.	Coding interesting and important features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes.	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4. Reviewing themes.	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts to tell an interesting and cohesive story.
5. Defining and naming themes.	Specifics of each theme are refined, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Producing the report.	This phase involves weaving together the analytic narrative and data extracts and contextualising the analysis in relation to existing literature.

The semi-structured interviews in Studies 1 and 2 were audiotaped. Audiotaping allowed me to concentrate fully during the interview process, without the need to take notes. I transcribed each audiotaped interview verbatim as soon as possible after the interview. The semi-structured interviews provided a substantial amount of data, making the data analysis process a challenging and painstaking one (Grbich, 2013; Padgett, 2004). While transcription

was a time-consuming process, it allowed me the opportunity to revisit the voice of each participant – the first phase in gaining familiarity with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This opportunity would have been missed had I relied on external transcription. During the transcription process I listened and looked for non-verbal cues in the midst of the spoken words (Breen, 2007; Denham & Onwuegbuzie, 2013). Pauses, silences, expressions of emotion and emphasis on particular words were noted in the transcription. Reading and then re-reading the transcripts enabled me to actively engage and fully immerse myself within the data. Making notes, line-marking of descriptors and threads enabled initial codes to be generated. Searching for similarities and differences in all of the data was part of moving towards the identification of themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013; Grbich, 2013; Reissman, 2008). Keeping oriented to the research questions for each of the studies helped to determine the relevance of the data moving towards defining and naming the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2013) (see Appendix 6).

In Study 3, twenty-eight service providers who identified as having contact with the families of missing people responded to the online survey, which used Qualtrics software. The readily accessible data generated from a computer-mediated platform made for relative ease of initial transcription. Following the same six-phase procedure proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) and used in Studies 1 and 2, I downloaded, read and re-read, and grouped individual answers, ensuring all responses were included and no details overlooked. Themes that indicated the respondent's awareness and understanding of the dynamics of missing and its impact on young people and families, and the ways service providers recognised the presence of young people when a loved one is missing, were identified and noted.

### **Insider as Researcher**

The research is not simply about gathering data but about sense-making between the individuals engaged in the research (Patton, 2015) and the researcher. Given this stance, it is important for me to situate myself as both researcher and practitioner in the missing persons sector. Research participants were drawn from the sector in which I worked for nine years, making me an insider/researcher. In light of this experience, an important consideration in my position as researcher was to adopt a reflexive approach (Attia & Edge, 2017; Braun & Clarke, 2019). As a qualitative researcher I am the primary tool for collecting and analysing the data, bringing my background, qualifications and experience to the area of study. From my experience I also brought my knowledge, feelings, and values, adopting a position of 'prospective reflexivity' (Attia & Edge, 2017, p. 35). While possibly affecting the objectivity

of the research, my involvement in the sector potentially enhanced the process because of these qualities I brought to the research.

Braun and Clarke (2013) suggest that it is likely that most researchers will hold multiple insider and outsider positions. Insiders share common experiences or identify with research participants (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Patton, 2015). As an insider, I worked for nine years in the missing persons sector, in a senior position as manager of FFMPU, and had worked closely in a clinical role with many families, including young people, with missing loved ones. As the coordinator of the only such unit in NSW and Australia, families engaged long-term with the staff in the unit, including myself, especially when loved ones remained missing. At the same time, I am an outsider because I have not experienced the loss of a missing loved one.

An advantage of being an insider is that access to, building rapport with, and engaging participants is made easier. Working in FFMPU afforded me a position of some privilege given the very limited number of mental health professionals working specifically with the families of missing people and even more specifically with young people. My position presented multiple opportunities to meet with family members and friends of missing people, and with service providers (Patton, 2015). Being able to engage with the family members and friends of missing people who contacted FFMPU prior to and during the research was an important counter to my outsider identity. Reflexivity about my position as both insider and outsider for this research is a vital component in communicating the authenticity and trustworthiness of the data (Patton, 2015). Strong personal and professional boundaries enabled me to engage with clients and participants, while also ensuring my personal experiences remained separate.

### **From Clinical Practice to Research**

Before I embarked on this research in the area of missing persons, I had worked for many years (and continue to do so) as a social work practitioner. I am qualified as an Accredited Mental Health Social Worker (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2020) and have spent my professional life working in service delivery, predominantly in clinical, counselling and management roles with a range of people whose lives had been impacted by trauma, grief, and loss. Their ages have ranged from childhood through adolescence, adulthood, and older age. In 2010, I was employed as the Coordinator of the Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit (FFMPU), NSW Department of Justice (DOJ). At this point I had worked as a social worker for almost three decades in the NSW health sector. Despite having worked in a range of clinical and counselling positions, I had only met two or three individuals who identified that they were

living with the loss of a missing person. Prior to joining FFMPU, I had also worked as an Approved Victims of Crime Counsellor within Victims Services, NSW DOJ, where FFMPU was located. The usual referrers, which included other service providers and mental health professionals, seldom identified the loss of a missing person as a primary or secondary reason for referral. I wonder now whether the referrer disenfranchised the experience of loss for the person being referred by attributing their problems to a mental health difficulty, such as anxiety or depression, or whether the person seeking support did not identify their difficulties as directly related to the loss of their missing loved one.

Moving into the role of FFMPU coordinator, I soon realised that there were often times when little recognition or support was offered to the families of missing people, and even less recognition of young people within these families. Family members who became aware of the existence of FFMPU, usually as a result of their own searching, presented with a range of questions and difficulties related to their loved one being a missing person, of a systemic, practical, emotional, and psychological nature. It became apparent that the experience of, and the need for support for, those left behind was unrecognised in most contexts. Concerningly, young people were the 'silent' and often overlooked witnesses to what unfolded when someone in their family was a missing person. The impact on them was most often discounted.

Having worked in child protection for many years, the maxim 'child protection is everyone's business' was commonly promoted. Similarly, that is my view of the approach required when working with the families of missing people. I believe it is the business and the responsibility of individuals, service providers, the community, and policy makers to be aware and supportive of, and responsive to the needs of those left behind. I do not mean this in an intrusive, voyeuristic way but, rather, in an inclusive, respectful way. Families, communities and service providers need to work together systemically to recognise the complex and challenging experience of those left behind, not just for the first short time after loss but for as long as their loved one remains missing.

Young people in this situation cannot be excluded or ignored. Like those who attended In the Loop support group meetings, young people want and need to feel included and recognised. Families should not be expected by others who may not feel their loss the way they do to be silent, move on or accept that the missing person is not returning when there is no tangible evidence. When support is not offered, or when service providers discontinue contact because the missing person remains missing, I believe we, as community members, service providers, and researchers, all have a responsibility to recognise, include, and maintain a

connection with those left behind. When services are not available, I believe we need to ask why, rather than accept fiscal constraints as justification for inaction.

Referrals for support, if or when made, should not be seen as a way of assisting those left behind to come to terms with having a missing loved one or to accept that the missing person is dead. It is everyone's business to clearly convey the message to those affected that they are more than just a statistical problem needing resolution, or a discomfiting social problem; that the challenges they experience are understandable given the ambiguous, ongoing, and sometimes insoluble nature of missingness.

If community members and service providers could overcome their discomfort and unease at dealing with those who live with not knowing, the families of missing people might not be offered platitudes about closure and moving on; not be avoided by acquaintances or advised to learn to cope; and not be categorised or labelled as 'difficult' or 'obsessed' by investigators and other service providers, all because they continue to feel distressed, to search for answers and recognition for their missing loved one.

In attempting to do justice to the stories that have been shared with me, I acknowledge my own experiences of ambiguous loss. Before I came to work in the missing persons sector in 2010, I, like many, had experienced losses in my own life and had struggled with some of them more than others. I had struggled with the less clear, less socially recognised or supported losses. I had also witnessed the struggles of others in my personal and professional life; however, I had never named these losses and their insults as ambiguous loss.

I had experienced ambiguous loss in the physical presence and the psychological absence of my mother, as my sons were born. A photo of my mother holding my newborn son reveals her complete lack of cognition as he was handed to her. She had longed for grandchildren. Her absence was reinforced by a lifelong friend who gently asked, 'Is your mum alright?' My mother was physically alright, but Alzheimer's took her psychologically from her family long before she left us physically.

More was to come that would challenge me as I embarked on this research. I experienced the two most significant losses in my life just after my Confirmation of Candidature in 2015. They tumbled into each other a week apart – one ambiguous, traumatic, and devastating; and the other less ambiguous but devastating because its significance and impact were, at the time, completely eclipsed by the first. The grief associated with both and their occurrence so close to each other was something I had never before experienced.

Was I drawn to this area of work by my own losses? The very definite answer is 'no'. I strongly believe that our personal experiences need to be dealt with and put firmly in their place

to allow us to move forward professionally and to be fully psychologically present in the work we do.

## **The Untold Stories of Young People**

The following story, based on my own experience working as a social work practitioner in the missing persons sector, offers an insight into the complexity of the experience for those left behind when a loved one is missing. It is an experience characterised by uncertainty and hope, of lives spent waiting for the return of a missing loved one, of waiting for information from the public and those involved in the investigation and hoping for comfort from all of the distress that follows a loved one's disappearance. The story also offers insights into the expectations and judgements family members impose on themselves about their emotional response to continuing to live with not knowing what has become of their missing loved one. When loved ones remain missing, sometimes for many years, those left behind may question their own response to the grief they feel and to their right to continue to feel such grief when the loss remains unresolved. Those left behind can be silenced and overlooked in their silence.

I answered the phone one morning at FFMPU. The caller, Rob,\* started the conversation with what sounded a little like an apology: 'I'm not sure if I'm eligible to be a part of the group.' Rob went on to say that he had seen a post on social media, on a privately moderated missing persons social media page that was liked and followed by many thousands of people. The post was promoting an upcoming FFMPU support group meeting in the regional city in which Rob lived. I invited him to tell me a little more about himself to better understand his thoughts about his questioning of his eligibility to attend.

Rob explained that his only sibling, his sister, had gone missing when they were both in their mid-teens. He explained that his sister had been missing for more than 35 years. Rob had spent the 35 years since his sibling's disappearance caring for his grieving mother, who had recently passed away never knowing what had become of her missing daughter. Rob's father had died many years previously and Rob's story seemed to indicate that he had placed his own life on hold to care for his mother. He spoke of feeling a duty to protect his mother and to care for her in her grief, of intimate relationships not pursued and of going through his adolescence and most of his adult life finding little enjoyment. No one, apart from his mother, appeared to

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\* A pseudonym is used in the following story and specific details that might identify the family are omitted.

have cared for Rob or asked about his loss. He also spoke of his father's psychological absence and what he perceived to be his father's emotional abandonment of his mother and himself.

I asked Rob why he thought he might not be eligible to attend a support group for family members of missing people, to which he replied, 'because it's been so long'. Rob spoke of the impact of his sister's disappearance and explained that he thought constantly of his sister and what might have happened to her. He did not understand why he continued to feel as he did, and why he had been unable to resolve his feelings of grief. He questioned the validity of his continuing difficulties, his right to continue to experience feelings of grief, and conveyed the belief that his feelings indicated a failure in the way he had grieved his sister's disappearance. He expressed the belief that had he grieved effectively, according to his understanding of resolving feelings of grief and 'moving on', he should not feel as distressed and sad as he did.

Rob explained that at the time of his sister's disappearance, investigators had formed the opinion that she had run away from home. His perception of the search and subsequent investigation lead him to feel that his sister's disappearance had been dismissed based on the opinion that she had run away. He recalled the search as being of short duration. As a teenager he had felt powerless to have any input or influence over what was happening with the investigation.

A few weeks later Rob attended the support group meeting. As always, family members who had previously attended welcomed him quietly and introduced themselves with a brief introduction of their own experience of their loved one being a missing person. Rob began to tell the story of his missing sister, cautiously. He described going to meet her as arranged to walk her home on that night and discovering that she was not at the agreed meeting place. Rob spoke quietly and those present, the parents and siblings of missing loved ones, listened with empathy. At one point a member began to ask him a question. He responded firmly and quietly saying, 'I'll come to that; I haven't finished'. I don't recall the question, but what was evident in his firm reply was that Rob wanted to tell his story and to have his voice heard. When he had finished speaking, a member of the group asked him had he ever told the story before, to which he replied 'no'.

### **You Have to be Missed to be a Missing Person**

Missingness becomes of concern when someone is missed. (Clark, 2006, p. 42)

It has been said that a missing person has to be missed by someone to be regarded as missing (Taylor, Woolnough, & Dickens, 2018). In my work at FFMPU, as one of a team of



mental health professionals who responded to family members and friends who telephoned the service, callers sometimes wanted to discuss their concerns and options about a family member or friend they feared might be a missing person – someone they had missed. The phone conversation often followed a similar course to the conversation with Rob in terms of feeling uncertain and questioning the rationality of their worries and feelings. The caller would express concern about the whereabouts or safety of a loved one, friend or acquaintance. This person might be someone with whom they had frequent, regular contact or saw infrequently. That person might have failed to keep an appointment, attend an arranged meeting or make a phone call or have dropped out of contact.

The caller, while expressing their concern for the person's safety, sometimes also expressed concern about being seen to overreact, of being perceived as a nuisance in making a missing person's report, of not wanting to intrude on the privacy or expose another to scrutiny by raising a concern for that person with the police. Sometimes an understandably limited understanding of issues relating to missing people contributed to the caller's uncertainty. Callers sometimes expressed concern about causing trouble for someone they feared might be missing and who was not; or they thought it possible for punitive action to be taken against a person who might have chosen to distance themselves or disconnect from others. The myth that sometimes prevails in such a scenario is that 'going missing is a crime', and that the person who is feared missing may be punished if reported missing and then found not to be. It is not a crime to go missing nor is it a crime for someone to make a missing person's report if they have genuine concerns for the welfare or wellbeing for another whose whereabouts are unknown (Families and Friends of Missing Persons, 2014).

The consistent response of the FFMPU team was that if a person met the police definition of a missing person, the caller was able to lodge a missing person's report with local police in NSW or, if interstate, the local police in that state. What became evident is that the event of going missing is not always clearly delineated. Sometimes it is only after phone calls are exchanged between a number of people, possible locations are checked and excluded, and timeframes are backtracked that the 'dawning realisation' (Personal communication, May 2016) that the unthinkable possibility of the person being missing occurs. The following words describe such a scenario for one family when a mother was asked about the gradual realisation that her daughter was missing:

Her dad called me. He said 'There's something wrong. She's not around.' He knew on the day, that she'd gone. He could tell because she wasn't answering her phone. That

was really out of character, and I don't know how he could tell, but being a dad, they are very close. (Belle)

## **Summary**

This chapter demonstrates that a strong and appropriate methodology has been used to address the research questions and successfully investigate the little-understood experience of young people when a loved one is missing. It explains how a qualitative methodology using semi-structured interviews and a survey questionnaire was used to address the research aims and questions. It began with a description of the research participants in each of the studies, the research design, the rationale for the chosen methodology, and thematic analysis. Recruitment strategies, inclusion criteria, positioning myself as an insider researcher and the origins of my research are explained. The following chapter introduces and names the missing people, the young people, parents of young people, and service providers, presenting a snapshot of each family grouping.

## **CHAPTER 5**

# **MISSING PEOPLE, RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS, AND SERVICE PROVIDERS**

### **Introduction**

This chapter is the first of four chapters that present the analysis of the data generated from Studies 1, 2, and 3 in this research. The family context of each missing person and the research participants related to them – the young people, and the parents of young people affected by the loss of their missing loved one – are introduced. The individual participants and their missing loved ones are named (using pseudonyms), and a snapshot of each is presented. It is important to recognise that each of the participants - the young people and their family members, had lived with not knowing what had become of their missing loved one for a significant amount of time, made more significant by the age of each young person at the time of their loved one going missing.

The experience of each young person and parent is individual, telling stories of events significant to each of them. Some experiences are unique; others are shared by more than one young person. Each participant told a story touched by an experience of ambiguous loss and ongoing grief, trusting that their unique experience and their missing loved one would be viewed non-judgementally, with compassion and understanding. Their experiences of living with not knowing cannot be understood without recognition of the context in which their loved one going missing occurred. For this reason, the roles played by parents and other family members, friends, and the wider community are vitally important in understanding the whole of the young person's experience.

The service providers, part of the wider missing persons community, and the respondents to the survey questionnaire in Study 3 are introduced as a group coming from a range of professions. They form part of the community context that intersects with young people, their families, and the wider community.

## **Introducing the Participants**

I begin by providing an overall snapshot of the missing people and their family members who are the participants in Studies 1 and 2. In Study 1, the participants are young people who have experienced the loss of a missing loved one. The young people are differentiated as Group 1a (young people who were up to 20 years of age at time of interview) and Group 1b (who were young people at the time of missing and adults at the time of interview). In Study 2 the participants are the parents of young people affected by the loss of a missing person. Each participant is presented along with other family members when more than one person is related to the same missing person. This means that some introductions are of a single person and their missing loved one, and there were no other family members involved in the study. Participants were interviewed individually and face to face, with one exception – a young person and both parents who asked to be interviewed together.

First name pseudonyms are used for each participant and missing person. Each snapshot is written in the past tense because it refers to the time of interview rather than the present or time of writing. The use of the past tense in reference to family members or their missing person does not make any assumption or inference about the outcome or the status of the missing person. The information is necessarily limited, presenting factual details such as age, living situation, and family composition. While a snapshot cannot begin to capture the intricate story of each lived experience, each snapshot is intended simply as an introduction to the family context, which is so important in understanding the experience of young people.

I have endeavoured to present this information as accurately and sensitively as possible and am mindful of the privacy of individuals. Participants who read this will likely be able to identify themselves, but I expect that is where identification mostly ends. An exception to this might occur where the family members of one missing person have met the family members of another missing person in the course of attending a support group meeting or a missing persons event. I have intentionally omitted details that might make it possible for anyone outside of the family unit to easily identify any participant or missing person. Where ages are given, they are as accurate as possible based on the memory of each participant, keeping in mind the passing of time, the age of each participant at the time of missing and, in some instances, the extended duration of the time the loved one has been a missing person.

## The Missing People

The information in this section pertains to the missing people. Nine missing people are related to the 18 participants in Studies 1 and 2. The missing people are six males – Simon, James, David, Mark, Noel, and John – and three females – Jane, Sarah, and Fiona. In some instances, more than one participant in Studies 1 and 2 is related to the same missing person. They were aged between 16 and 61 years at the time they went missing. At the time of interview, they had been missing between two-and-a-half and 43 years. In terms of the relationship of the missing person to the young people participants in Study 1 (Groups 1a and 1b), they are either a parent, a sibling, an uncle or a cousin. At the commencement of this research, each missing person was classified as a long-term missing person; that is, they were unresolved missing people specifically at the commencement of the research.

All of the missing people related to the research participants are thought to be missing from NSW, predominantly in regional or rural areas.

Table 5.1

### *Characteristics of the Missing People*

Characteristic	Specifics
Gender of missing person	6 males, 3 females
Age of missing person at time of going missing	16–61 years
Length of time missing at time of interview	2.5–43 years

Between the commencement of the research and the interviews, one adult missing person was located deceased in NSW, after being missing for approximately two-and-a-half years. Another missing person, a young person, was listed as a missing person for almost three decades. At the time of the research interviews, renewed investigations began to suggest that the young person might have died soon after being reported missing. The identity of this missing person had not been confirmed at that time but was confirmed in late 2018. Four research participants are related to these two missing people who have been located deceased or presumed located deceased, two from Study 1 and two from Study 2. The four participants who are related to the two located/potentially located missing people clearly indicated that they wished to continue as participants in the research. No further information has come to light about the remaining seven missing people whose family members participated in the research.

Five of the missing males lived alone at the time of going missing. One missing male, the youngest, who lived with his parents, went missing from a mental health facility, and another had been recently discharged or had chosen to leave a mental health facility. Each of the young women had recently moved away from a parent or had less frequent contact with family members. The living situation of the missing person, and whether they lived alone or with others, appeared to affect how quickly their absence was noticed. When the missing loved one lived with others their absence was noticed earlier. If the missing loved one was not immediately missed, it follows that a missing person report was delayed.

### **Study 1 – The Young People**

There are ten participants in Study 1. The participants are eight females, Debra, Zara, Amy, Lisa, Tara, Eliza, Margot, and Megan, and two males, Will and Josh. The young people were aged from four up to 20 years of age at the time their loved one went missing. Participants are divided into two groups, 1a and 1b (see Table 4.1). In group 1a there are five young people. They were aged from 14 to 19 years at the time of interview and this group comprised three females and two males. At the time of their loved one going missing, Group 1a participants were aged from 4 to 15 years. Three of the young people were in secondary school at the time of interview and the remaining two had recently completed their secondary schooling. All were living at home with one or both parents, although none of the young people in Group 1a resided primarily with their missing loved one. In Group 1b, the five participants, who were all female, were aged between 24 and 54 years at the time of the interview. At the time their loved one went missing they were aged from 13 to 20 years. At that time, four had been in secondary school and one at university, and all were residing with one or both parents; however, all but one did not live in the same household as their missing loved one. Throughout the research I refer to the participants in Groups 1a and 1b collectively as ‘the young people’, as they were all young people at the time of their loved one going missing.

Each of the young people participating in the study had dealt with many of the expected and significant life events and changes associated with adolescence. Their loved one going missing was immensely significant, while at the same time, understandably, completely unexpected. Most of the group had completed the expected transitions through primary and secondary education, with some moving onto tertiary education and employment. Several had participated in student exchange and sporting programs, travelled overseas, and formed personal and social relationships, witnessing and being present in families where births and deaths had occurred.

The young people in Study 1 naturally provided the bulk of the data, simply because it is their experience that is the key focus of this research and around which the research revolves. Young people are also the larger cohort of participants in Studies 1 and 2. The data from the individual interviews, combined with the experiences they shared in In the Loop support group meetings, the subsequent In the Loop publication (Families & Friends of Missing Persons, 2016a), and the stories that appeared in the media added richness to and reinforced what they shared of their lived experience.

## **Study 2 – The Parents**

Each of the eight participants in Study 2 is a parent of one or more young people affected by the loss of a missing person. There are seven females, Sally, Belle, Lisa, Nell, Carol, Donna, and Patricia, and one male participant, Ryan. Five of these parents were living with one or more of the young people in Study 1 at the time of interview. At the time of the loved one going missing, each of the parents was aged in their late 20s to mid 40s, and all were parenting and living with young people affected by the loss of a missing person.

At the time of interview, none of the parents in Study 2 was living with the person who had gone missing. While not coping with the developmental challenges of their own adolescence, they were dealing with the significant life changes that parenting and ageing present.

## **Introducing the Missing People and their Family Members**

### ***Simon (missing person), Debra (Study 1), and Sally (Study 2)***

Simon lived alone and was 45 years of age at the time he went missing in 2011. He had experienced some mental health difficulties and prior to going missing had been admitted to a mental health facility. Simon was a missing person for approximately two-and-a-half years before his remains were found.

Debra (Study 1) is Simon's daughter, and Sally (Study 2) is Debra's mother and Simon's ex-partner. At the time of interview Debra was in the middle years of her secondary schooling and living with Sally, who was working full-time, and her stepfather, Nick. Debra's father, Simon, went missing when Debra was in the last year of her primary schooling. Debra's parents had separated when Debra was a young child. Her father lived nearby, and Debra spent time with him of her choosing.

As Debra had previously met members of the FFMPU team, including myself, she opted to be interviewed at home. As a first interview, this was a comfortable space for me as the interviewer and for Debra, who was aware she was one of the first young people to be interviewed in the research. Prior to the commencement of the interview, Debra showed me her bedroom, her guitar, and photos of herself with her father, her pets, and other family members. She showed me a typewriter – valued and significant because her father had given it to her. We sat comfortably in the family room and were joined on the couch by the family pets.

As mentioned at the beginning of this introduction, Simon's remains were found after he had been missing for approximately two-and-a-half years. At the time of interview, Debra, Sally and Simon's siblings were awaiting confirmation of his identity. Despite this uncertainty, and the difficult timing of the research interview, Debra and Sally clearly indicated their wish to continue to participate in the research.

### ***Jane (missing person), Will, Zara, Amy (Study 1), and Belle (Study 2)***

Jane was 23 years of age at the time she went missing in 2008. She was living in regional NSW. Jane is the mother of two children, who were aged three and four at the time she went missing. Jane is the daughter of Belle (Study 2) from a previous relationship. Jane remains missing.

Will and Zara (Study 1) are the younger half-siblings of Jane. At the time of interview, Will was in upper secondary school and Zara in early secondary school. Will and Zara were living with their mother, Belle (Study 2), and their father. At the time Jane went missing, Will and Zara were in primary school. Belle was working in a consultancy role, and living with her husband, the father of Will and Zara.

I interviewed Will, Zara, and Belle at home, with family dogs and cat present. I had met all three previously at missing persons events and support group meetings, with Belle attending the adult support group meetings, and Will and Zara two of the founding members of In the Loop, the support group meetings for young people. They welcomed me into their home, as they had on previous occasions, as the Coordinator of FFMPU. Zara had prepared food for us to share when I arrived.

Amy (Study 1) was in her mid-20s, working full-time and living with her partner at the time of interview. Amy is the cousin of Will and Zara, and the niece of Belle. Amy was 15 years of age at the time Jane went missing. She was living with her parents and her older brother in a neighbouring suburb, having contact with Jane at family gatherings and on other occasions.



I had met Amy previously at a missing persons event and interviewed her after she had attended a support group meeting in the ACT with her aunt Belle.

***James (missing person), Josh (Study 1), Nell (Study 2), and Carol (Study 2)***

James was 61 years of age at the time he went missing in 2010 from coastal NSW, where he was living alone. James remains missing.

James is the father of Carol, a child from James's first marriage. Carol was in her late 30s when her father went missing. At the time of interview Carol was the mother of two adolescent young people who did not participate in this research. Carol lives with her husband and children in a capital city and works full-time. I interviewed Carol in a public space she had nominated as convenient at the end of her working day. Another member of the FFMPU team was present, with Carol's permission, during the interview. I had met Carol previously at support group meetings, as had the other FFMPU team member who was present.

Josh is the son of James from his second marriage to Nell. At the time of interview, Josh was 19 years of age and had recently completed his secondary schooling, was employed full-time and was planning his future. James went missing when Josh was approximately 13 years of age. Josh was living with his mother Nell both when his father went missing and at the time of the interview. Nell and Josh live together in a capital city. Nell works full-time. I had met Nell previously at support group meetings but had not previously met Josh. I interviewed Josh and Nell at home separately.

***David (missing person), Lisa (Study 1), Ryan and Linda (Study 2)***

David was 37 years of age at the time he went missing in 2001, near his workplace in a Sydney suburb. David is the uncle of Lisa, the brother of Ryan and the brother-in-law of Linda. David lived alone. He had regular contact with Ryan, Linda and Lisa. David remains missing.

At the time of interview, Lisa was 18 years of age and in her first year of tertiary study. David went missing when Lisa, his niece, was four years of age. Lisa lived with her parents, Ryan and Linda, and her younger brother, who was born after David went missing. Both Ryan and Linda were working full-time. I had met Lisa and her younger brother, and Ryan and Linda, previously at missing persons events. Lisa was one of the early members of the In the Loop support group meetings. I interviewed all three together, as they requested, at home.

### ***Mark (missing person) and Tara (Study 1)***

Mark was 18 years of age at the time he went missing from the psychiatric ward of a large hospital in Sydney in 1973. Mark remains missing.

Mark is the older brother of Tara. At the time of interview, Tara was working full-time and living in Sydney with her two adolescent sons and her daughter. Tara was approximately 14 years old and in early secondary boarding school in Sydney when Mark went missing. At the time, their parents were living in country NSW, where Tara and her three siblings spent school holidays. I interviewed Tara in her home. Prior to the interview, I had had telephone and email contact with Tara and met her for the first time at the research interview.

### ***Noel (missing person) and Eliza (Study 1)***

Noel was 23 years of age at the time he went missing in 2003 from a small town in regional NSW. Noel lived alone, his parents lived nearby, and he is the older brother of Eliza. Noel remains missing.

Eliza was in her early 30s and living in regional NSW with her husband and young child, at the time of interview. Eliza was returning to part-time work after maternity leave. Eliza was 20 years of age and attending a university in Sydney when her brother, Noel, went missing. Her young daughter and the family dog were present. I met Eliza at home, for the first time, at interview.

### ***John (missing person) and Margot (Study 1)***

John was 48 years of age and went missing in 1988 off the east coast of Australia while sailing. John is the father of Margot. John was separated from Margot's mother at the time he went missing. John remains missing.

Margot was in her early 40s at time of interview, working full-time in a professional capacity and living with her two adolescent daughters. Margot was 13 years of age and in early secondary school when her father went missing. At the time, she was living with her mother and older brother in coastal Queensland. I interviewed Margot in a public space in her workplace that she identified as suitable for the interview. I had spoken previously via telephone, meeting Margot for the first time at interview.

### ***Sarah (missing person) and Donna (Study 2)***

Sarah was 16 years of age, had left secondary school and was living between her mother Donna's and grandparents' homes at the time she went missing from the South Coast region of NSW in 1988. Sarah remains missing.

Donna was in her early 60s and living alone in the South Coast region and engaged in community work, at the time of interview. She was in her 30s when Sarah, her oldest daughter, went missing. At that time Donna had three children younger than Sarah, who were aged 14, six and three years. They are now adults with children of their own; some live nearby and have regular contact with Donna. I interviewed Donna at home. We had met previously at her home and at a support group meeting.

### ***Fiona (missing person), Megan (Study 1), and Patricia (Study 2)***

Fiona was 17 years of age and had recently moved from country NSW to Sydney seeking employment prior to going missing in 1987. Fiona is the cousin of Megan and the niece of Patricia. Patricia's sister is Fiona's mother. Fiona was a missing person for approximately 30 years, until investigations located her deceased in 2017.

Megan was in her early 40s and living in country NSW with her husband and three children at the time of interview. Megan was 14 years of age and living with her parents, two younger siblings and extended family, when Fiona went missing. I interviewed Megan in a community setting in her local area. Patricia was married and living in country NSW with her three children, of whom Megan is the oldest, when Fiona went missing. Patricia shared a close relationship with, and lived near, her sister, the mother of Fiona, at the time Fiona went missing. Fiona's mother passed away several years ago. I had met both Megan and Patricia previously at missing persons events. I interviewed Patricia in a private counselling space.

### **Study 3 – The Service Providers**

Study 3 sought information from a service providers' perspective using a survey questionnaire. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Not all respondents answered every survey question. While some respondents provided generic responses to the question asking for professional title and workplace, others provided a specific title and workplace location, including the name of their agency or service. To preserve anonymity, specific workplace locations and titles are not included in the thesis.

If the experience of young people living with missing is not recognised or is disenfranchised by an individual or group of service providers, then it is reasonable to suggest that that individual or group might not recognise the relevance of, or choose to respond to, a survey about the support needs of young people.

### ***Introducing the Service Providers***

Twenty-eight service providers responded to the survey questionnaire. Participants identified themselves as academics, social workers, psychologists, tertiary students, managers, youth workers, and consultants. Their places of employment or location included universities, State government departments, a not-for-profit organisation, drug and alcohol services, a youth accommodation unit, and an out-of-home care service. Some identified that the service they worked in was a crisis service. The majority identified that they worked specifically with families, while others identified as working with young people. Several participants identified that their agency was connected with the missing persons sector. Service providers indicated that in the course of their work they had come into contact with one or both parents, one or more siblings, a cousin, and one or more children of a missing person. When a response is attributed to a particular service provider, they are identified only by their generic title and differentiated in terms of place of work or generic professional title if given, such as, missing persons sector, out-of-home care or psychologist.

## **Summary**

This chapter introduced the missing people and the research participants in Studies 1, 2 and 3, acknowledging the family and social context in which the event of the loved one going missing occurred. The participants in Study 1 were the young people left behind when their loved one became a missing person. In Study 2 the participants were the parents of young people affected by the loss of a missing person, and in Study 3 the participants were service providers who came into contact with young people and family members affected by the loss of a missing person.

The next four chapters explicate the four themes identified from the thematic analysis of the semi-structured interviews in Studies 1 and 2, and the survey questionnaire in Study 3.

# **CHAPTER 6**

## **LISTENING TO THE VOICES OF YOUNG PEOPLE**

### **Introduction**

The young people described their experience of their loved ones going missing as sudden, profound and enduring. While their individual stories were unique and each responded to the experience differently, there were commonalities and shared themes. The results of the thematic analysis of the semi-structured interviews and the survey questionnaire are explained in this chapter.

The chapter begins with a synopsis of the experience of two young people, each with a missing father. The synopsis highlights how individual experiences can be both similar and different, and then introduces the voices of all of the young people, combined with the words of the parents. Two themes – recognising young people and living with not knowing – are specifically introduced and discussed in this chapter.

Presenting the themes identified in the data analysis cannot be done in a linear manner. The themes and threads are interwoven in the young person's experience of their loved one being a missing person. There are, however, significant events or points in time that mark their experience, sometimes relating to one or more of the themes identified. Being informed that their loved one is a missing person is the first such significant event for the young person, so their experience of receiving this information is explained as a thread in the theme of being recognised. Living with not knowing, the second theme introduced, permeates every part of the young person's lived experience. In explaining the young person's experience of living with not knowing, the practical and psychosocial impacts of being a young person left behind are described.

While young people being recognised first occurred for most at the point of being informed that their loved one was a missing person, being recognised and included was experienced in different ways throughout their later lives and whenever the loss of their loved one was felt or acknowledged. Living with not knowing might have begun at the point of learning about their loved one being a missing person; however, it continued for each of them through their youth and into their adult lives.

## **The Experience of Two Young People – Debra and Margot**

The following synopsis recounts the different experiences of two young people in relation to all four themes of living with not knowing, a growing awareness and recognising young people and their need for support.

Debra and Margot were similar in age, 11 and 13 years old respectively, at the time each one's father went missing. These young people learned their father was missing soon after each was reported as missing. Debra was in the final year of primary school and Margot in early secondary school. Each young person lived with their mother and a sibling. In both cases their parents were separated. Each young person spoke of regular contact with her father, spending time engaged in activities they enjoyed together.

### **Similarities and Differences in Experience**

The fathers of these two young people went missing almost 25 years apart, one in 2011 and the other in 1988. Debra's father was the most recently missing person in this research, and Margot's one of the longest-missing. At the time of interview, Debra, whose father had been missing for two-and-a-half years, was a middle secondary school student. Margot, whose father had been missing for almost 25 years, was a tertiary-educated health professional and a parent, in her early 40s. One father was thought to have gone missing after having experienced mental health difficulties, while the other was believed to be missing through misadventure.

Both young people learned that their father was a missing person in different ways. Debra's mother, Sally, had learned from the missing person's brother when Debra's father's absence was noticed. Margot was at home and present when the police arrived and informed Margot's mother of the details they had learned about Margot's father's disappearance. For Debra, first her grandmother, and then her mother, initiated contact with FFMPU, inquiring about the availability of support and counselling for Debra. The adults in Debra's family recognised their own and Debra's distress, combined with an uncertainty of how best to support her. Debra's mother, Sally, expressed her concern for Debra when she inquired about support: 'My poor Debra, she is so upset, as we all are. We both need someone to talk to. I don't know how to comfort her.'

FFMPU organised telephone contact and then face-to-face support as a matter of priority for Debra, who then attended individual counselling with a member of the FFMPU team, accompanied by her mother. Debra later became a participant in In the Loop, the support group meeting facilitated by the FFMPU team for young people. Importantly, those closest to Debra

recognised her distress and were available to support her. Other people with whom she had regular contact, including one of her teachers, were informed that her father was a missing person. Debra was permitted to have time away from school. Whether Debra verbalised her need for support soon after learning that her father was a missing person is unclear. What was evident, recognised and acted upon was her need to access support.

In contrast to Debra's experience, Margot's father went missing at a time when organised support services for families were non-existent in Australia. Margot reported that she was neither asked about the need for nor offered support when her father went missing. After being informed that her father was missing, her experience was quite different. As Margot recalled:

I got one day off school. My mother went up north to where they thought [my dad might have been] and she sent us [Margot and her brother] to her friend's place to stay. So, on the first day she was gone I stayed home from school. The second day they said to me, 'Right, no point in being miserable, off you go, up and away with you', so I went back to school and I stayed at school, and that was that.

I did say to my mum recently, 'Why didn't you help me?' And she said quite clearly, 'It never occurred to me that I should.' She said she had her friends in church supporting her and she said, 'It's not that I thought that I should, and I didn't do it, it just never occurred to me that I needed to do those things for you.'

While Margot did not specifically verbalise a need for support to her mother or anyone else at the time of learning that her father was missing, her description of being at the memorial service for her father indicates that her high level of distress was observed by those closest to her. Their response to Margot crying indicated their awareness of her distress but Margot did not recall any acknowledgement of it or any attempt to comfort or support her. Instead she spoke of feeling excluded and physically removed by those she expected and hoped would support her. She recalled the following:

I was crying, and I couldn't stop crying, and so my mother got one of the people walking past, and asked them if they could take me home, so she could stay there and keep speaking to the rest of the people; so I guess the expectation was that I held myself together. That certainly was the message I took from that.

Margot did not recall witnessing distress in the adults closest to her in response to her father being a missing person. From this she deduced that feeling distressed and showing that distress through crying was not permitted. She spoke of trying to be invisible, of not wanting

others to witness her distress at home or at school. Margot explained that at school no one was aware that her father was a missing person, and recalled:

So, I tried really hard not to break down at school, but I remember we had these little cement alcoves, and these cement poles, and I tried to sit as close to one of those as possible so I could hide my face if I cried, because I didn't feel like I could say anything to anybody, so I sat there and tried not to be upset because I'd been told not to be. I'd been told to get up and get on with it, so I did.

The two synopses highlight that young people can have very different experiences, and receive different responses from those around them, in terms of their inclusion within their family and wider networks, and in the way their support needs are recognised.

In the almost twenty-five years that separated the disappearance of the fathers of Debra and Margot, greater attention has been paid to young people and their age-specific psychological and emotional needs. More research and public attention with regard to missing persons have resulted in an increasing awareness and understanding of the concept and dynamics of ambiguous loss, although further research and increased public awareness is required. When Debra's father went missing, limited support services that were unavailable when Margot's father went missing had been established. However, what is evident in each of their stories is that both young people were highly distressed by the disappearance of their fathers and needed to be recognised as part of what was happening, to be kept informed about information as it was received, and to be supported practically and emotionally by those with whom they lived. Debra accessed support at the time of her father going missing and in the time that followed, with the support of her mother, Sally, and other family members, who sought and located available support options for her in NSW. Debra became proactive in supporting peers who were experiencing their own difficulties in relation to trauma, grief and loss. Decades after her father went missing, and as an adult herself, Margot found support in an unexpected part of her family and accessed the same support service – FFMPU – that Debra had accessed as a young person.

### **The First Step in Recognising Young People**

This section will discuss how young people were informed that a loved one had gone missing. Being informed became the first point at which the young person's presence was recognised in all that followed their loved one going missing.



## **Informing Young People**

One of the earliest memories young people recalled, when interviewed, related to being told that their loved one was missing: the realisation of what had happened, who told them, when they were told, how the information was conveyed, and the words that were used. Josh recalled:

We were at home – Sunday. I was about to eat my sandwich and mum was like ‘I’ve got to tell you something’, and she pulled me over and we just had a chat. She said ‘Um, your dad’s gone missing’ and at that moment, I was like ‘Oh what?’ I was kind of, it was sort of a new thing, it wasn’t like he’d passed away, that stuff doesn’t happen to me like you see it on the news kind of thing and I was like, ‘Oh okay’. I was in a bit of shock and at the same time I was trying to process it.

While some young people clearly recalled the exact moment in both time and place of learning their loved one was a missing person, as Josh did above, others did not recall a defining moment in either time or place, or the words that were used to tell them that their loved one was missing. Most young people remembered it was their mother who had initially informed them, even if they were unable to recall the exact moment or words used. Cousins Will and Amy recalled their mothers, who were sisters, telling them about Jane, the daughter of one and niece of the other, being a missing person.

Mum told us all when it happened. I’m not quite sure actually when I was told she went missing, but I think it was pretty close to when she did. I don’t remember the words Mum used. (Will)

I can’t remember how I actually found out. I think my mum would have told me when I was home. I just can’t remember a defining moment. (Amy)

## **Parents Wanting to Reassure**

Parents described their own feelings of distress on realising that they would have to communicate that the loved one was a missing person. Several parents spoke of anticipating their young person’s reaction, fearing and not wanting to cause distress, and then witnessing that distress. They spoke of wanting to protect their children from difficult and distressing information and of not wanting their children to experience feelings of sadness. For all, this distress was further heightened by the uncertainty of knowing how to inform their young person, very limited information being available to parents on this topic, and of parents not knowing where to turn to seek guidance for talking to their young person. Sally recalled her

own 'extreme stress and anxiety', knowing she had to tell her daughter, Debra, that her father, Simon, was missing and almost rehearsing the words she had to say. She spoke of wanting to avoid telling her daughter and hoping that Simon would return, negating the need to tell her at all. Sally's words encapsulate the experience of parents faced with the task of delivering such news to their young person. Sally recalled:

It's hard to say an 11-year-old child should know. I didn't want to upset her. I knew she wanted to be told everything and believed that it was the right thing to do as much as it was sad and hurtful and all. You never want to see your child upset, no matter what it is, but I didn't regret it in that sense.

Most, but not all, young people reported an awareness that the parent who told them their loved one was missing was doing their best to reassure them that their loved one would be found safe. Margot recalled her mother's initial attempt to reassure: 'Well first of all mum said that he was missing, and we didn't know where he was, but she was sure that he'd be fine.'

While most of the young people were informed face to face, two young people were informed by a telephone call. Their memory of the words and the intense emotion evident at the time remained clear even decades later. It is likely that the fact that a phone call marked the moment of them being told potentially crystallised that moment in their memories. Each young person recalled their parent telling them what had happened, what was known at that point, recalling the tone of the phone call and the words that were used in an attempt to reassure them. Despite these reassurances, every young person spoke of being aware of unspoken feelings of panic, fear and concern in their parent. Two young people not related to each other, Tara and Eliza, recalled the phone calls. Tara received a phone call about her brother, Mark, while at boarding school.

We were allowed to speak to Mum at a time when we wouldn't have normally been allowed to speak on the phone. Mum told us that Mark had disappeared from the hospital and Dad was on his way down, and that it would all be okay; that Dad would find him. I think she was trying to reassure us, because I think she knew that Dad would do everything he could. It was in hand because Dad was on his way and Dad would sort it out.

Eliza, who was living away from her parents and attending university, recalled her mother's phone call about her brother, Simon:

My mum called and just said 'Look, you know, don't worry too much, but your dad's been around there [to her brother's house]. The door was open and he's not there.' She was trying

to kinda keep her cool, and I think I was at uni that day, and yeah, I'm pretty sure I came down that evening.

While young people recognised their parents' difficulty in knowing how to tell them about their missing loved one combined with a desire to protect them from distress, all felt that they had a right to be recognised and to be informed. Debra's words indicate that she recognised her mother's difficulty and the intention to protect her; nonetheless, she felt strongly that she had a right to know, as his only child, what was happening. Debra recalled:

At the time I was thinking, why wouldn't mum have told me? I just thought straight away, why didn't you tell me? I could see mum's perspective of not telling me, like keeping me safe, and whatever. I think at the time, though, when she hadn't told me straight away, I didn't see anything of that. I was just angry. It was like, 'He's my dad and it's my right to know.'

All of the young people expressed the belief that being told initially and then kept informed was their right based on the closeness of the relationship they shared with their missing loved one. They wanted to be told the information their parent or the next of kin knew, and to be informed as soon as information was known. Amy described the significance of the relationship.

I looked up to Jane like a sister, because I never had a sister, so we were all like really close for a bunch of cousins. We were the three grandkids; so, we were always together. When Jane went missing, I was 13 going on 14, and Jane was 23 turning 24 – it was always a pretty close relationship.

The age of the young person at the time of learning their loved one was missing may have affected the clarity of their memories, with those who were youngest at the time their loved one went missing being less able to remember clearly the point in time of being told. The two youngest at the time of learning their loved one was a missing person, aged four and seven years, spoke of not recalling details but being aware of an occurrence that had impacted their families. Lisa's comment, while it indicates her lack of specific memories, does show that she recalled the sadness of the adults around her. She said:

I don't remember much; it was like a news report on TV. I remember that. That's like it; I literally have no memories of specific conversations, but I remember everyone was sad a lot.

Zara, who was older than Lisa but still only seven years old at the time, recalled:

I think Mum told me pretty rapidly, although I don't remember how I found out Jane was missing. I just have a sense of knowing about her being missing. I probably didn't understand when they told me, but as I've grown up, now I know what it means. (Zara)

## **The Media's Part in Disseminating Information**

Media, including social media, at times publishes information about missing people that may relate to individual personal details, circumstances surrounding the disappearance or about a missing person being located, sometimes deceased. Parents spoke of their concern for the information young people could potentially access through media and social media. On one occasion, Carol spoke of feeling as though there was little choice about informing her children in terms of timing or setting, precipitated by her awareness that the media already knew her father and their grandfather, James, was missing. She recalled: 'We had to tell them because it was on the news. I think the options sort of get taken away from you about what you can and can't say.'

Young people spoke about learning information about their missing loved one via social media, in one instance before they had been told. On occasion information was published or posted before family members had been informed, or posted on the assumption that the family was already aware when, in fact, they were not. For example, Debra spoke of believing that her father was in a mental health facility; because she did not live with him and had not had contact with him for a short period of time, she was unaware that he had been reported to police as a missing person. Her father had, in fact, left the facility and had been missing for approximately two weeks. Debra spoke of reading a social media post written by a family member that revealed her father was missing, recalling feelings of shock, anger, and disbelief at not having been told earlier, and expressing her belief that her mother had an obligation to tell her as soon as the adults in the family had become concerned for her father's whereabouts and wellbeing. Debra recalled:

He did the right thing by telling me, but he dropped it like that, and I remember it was over Facebook as well, so it wasn't the best way to find out.

## **Living with Not Knowing**

To begin to understand the psychosocial experience of young people with a missing loved one, it is important to acknowledge the ongoing presence of ambiguity and the challenges ambiguous loss presents for those left behind – the young people and their families – and others, including service providers. Ambiguity characterised the experience of young people and their

families from the moment their loved one was suspected of being a missing person, or when a family member came to the realisation that a loved one was not where they were expected to be, and the realisation that their whereabouts were unknown. For all of the young people, learning that their loved one was a missing person was the first of many experiences that were characterised by ambiguity. Amy recalled her boyfriend trying to understand the concept of someone being a missing person.

My boyfriend said to me, 'What do you mean she's missing?' I didn't know how else to explain; so, I said, 'She's missing! I don't know where she's missing from. If we knew where she was missing from maybe that would help.' People just don't grasp that we just don't know. I don't know how better to explain it.

Another parent, Patricia, explained how the time at which her niece became a missing person was unclear.

We didn't know she was missing because she actually, technically didn't go missing. She had a plan and she went to the city, and she was put on the train. She had told everyone that she was going to live with friends temporarily till she found her own place and a job, and we never heard from her again. So, we waited two weeks and up until then none of us were aware that she was missing.

Boss (2006) writes about individuals searching to find ways and means of understanding and living with ambiguity when a loved one is a missing person. When a loved one remains missing, tolerating the ongoing ambiguity and trying to make sense of a situation that defies sense-making becomes even more challenging. Young people spoke about how they dealt with the ambiguity of their missing loved one's and their own situation; how it was acknowledged, approached, and responded to within each of their families. Their stories and reflections shed light on the impact of how they perceived family members understood and dealt with what was happening.

The young people described living in a changed environment where living with not knowing impacted their daily lives and interactions both within and outside their families. The ambiguity, which was remarked by each individual, was caused by an event beyond the individual's or their family's control. Living with the ambiguity of not knowing was a struggle for each young person; their questions remained unanswered, roles and expectations changed within their families, and the ambiguity they experienced presented challenges at every turn. Tara reflected on her awareness of the change that occurred in her family when her brother

went missing: ‘This terrible thing had happened, and everything had changed from that moment.’

Despite much physical and emotional effort to deal with the impact of a loved one going missing, young people spoke of the immobilising impact of living with not knowing. Young people and parents acknowledged their personal struggles to cope day to day with the loss of their missing loved one, of trying to make sense of many aspects of their loved one being missing and to cope with not finding answers to their many questions despite actively searching for those answers. All of the young people observed a range of responses within their family to their loved one going missing, speaking about what happened in the aftermath for them both within their families and their wider social networks. They described the responses in positive and negative ways, expressing surprise, gratitude, and admiration for their family members, as well as disappointment, distress, anger, and disbelief.

It is important to understand the impact of working in a context characterised by ambiguity, as is the situation for service providers who come in contact with young people and their families. In telling their stories, young people shed light on the effect of sometimes limited understanding of ambiguity or recognition of its existence and its potential impact on them. Margot’s mother’s admission, that the thought of Margot at 13 years of age needing support had never occurred to her, exemplifies this lack of understanding of the young person’s feelings. For others, the ongoing ambiguity for those left behind provoked strong and sometimes judgemental reactions, which impacted the recognition they received and the support they were deemed to require and were consequently offered. Young people and parents spoke of feeling judged by others if they held onto the notion of ambiguity – that is, if they chose to live with not reaching a conclusion about what had happened to their missing loved one (see Chapter 6, p. 98). Several young people felt that their parents continued searching and hope for their loved one’s return was viewed as unrealistic or foolish. An interaction between the mother of a missing person and an investigator exemplifies what can occur when family members continue to search for answers and others fail to recognise the ongoing challenge of living with not knowing. For many of those left behind, there is an understandable and continuing search for answers.

I rang the police station to inquire if there was any new information about him [the missing person]. The officer looked in the system and told me there was nothing new. I can’t remember what I said next, but he said to me, ‘You’re obsessed with this.’

For other young people, their experience within their family was different. In some families, young people recognised their parents' efforts to support them despite feelings of ongoing grief, the presence of many unanswered questions, and lack of clarity about what had happened to their missing loved one. Eliza recalled the emotional availability and support of her parents at a time that she recognised was extremely difficult for all of them. Eliza recalled:

I learned so much about my parents in terms of what awesome people they are. I mean my respect for them sticking together and coping and being there for me as much as they could, without topping themselves, I thought was pretty great.

At other times, when those closest to the young person appeared to be unable to offer support, others within the family stepped up. Tara, who described feeling pushed away by her mother, found support and emotional comfort from an unexpected source within her family.

I can't remember whether we would ask her, or she would just volunteer. But I do think that my grandmother, my mum's mother, boy did she make up for my mum. We would just hug her. She was almost 90 when she died, and I said to her 'Am I going to cause you broken bones?' Because she would let us hug her so much; and she and her sister, my great-aunt, were the two that we got all our physical love from because it was too painful for Mum.

## **The Passing of Time**

The traditional view of grief as a time-limited process where feelings of grief lessen and are eventually resolved was not the experience described by young people or parents. The expectations and assumptions that the passing of time might bring respite from physically searching for the missing loved one, and from the resultant feelings of grief, were seemingly imposed by others. Some, including friends and service providers, suggested the young person should 'move on' (Eliza) or 'get over it' (Families and Friends of Missing Persons, 2016a). The length of time that had passed since their loved one's disappearance appeared to make little difference for most young people in terms of lessening the grief and loss they felt and observed within their families. As Sarah noted:

Time doesn't make a difference. At least with a death, time does make a difference. It's much easier to accept over time, but this, no. I go to bed in wintertime and I think, 'Oh, it's freezing out there, is she out there, is she on the street, is she warm, is she cold?'

A number of young people reflected on the substantial proportion of their lives taken up with having a missing loved one in their life. The comments below reflect the young person's sense of time having a missing loved one in their life and living with not knowing.

He's been missing now for most of my life. (Margot)

I've just grown up with a missing person in my life. It shouldn't be like that, but it is. It's kind of like the norm. (Amy)

It's just another thing in my backstory, of how I've become who I am and stuff, because it's been going on for so long that it's just part of me. (Zara)

The passing of time was measured and experienced differently. For some, time stood still, while for others it seemed to pass almost unnoticed. Time was measured by how long the loved one had been missing. It was also calculated based on the age of the missing person – at the time of going missing, in the current time, and in relation to other family members. Age and developmental milestones took on greater significance when important dates or events occurred; for example, when the young person's children reached the same age as the young person had been at the time their loved one went missing. Margot recalled her daughter reaching the same age she was when her father went missing.

I was 13 when he went missing. He's been missing now for most of my life. He was in his 40s, like me. [My daughter] is the age I was ... [L]eading up to her turning 13 I had a very difficult year. I just had these ongoing nightmares that something was going to happen to me, and I was going to die. It wasn't the fear of me dying; it was the fear of leaving my kids without someone to care for them and it just absolutely floored me – the thought of my kids having to go through something like I went through.

Time was spent actively searching for both the missing person and answers, and anxiously waiting for news and phone calls. Individual differences in the lives of those left behind impacted their capacity to search. Some family members trusted that the police were doing all they could, while others wanted to see more being done by investigators to locate their missing loved one. Not all of the families left behind had access to the resources required to enable them to search themselves. These included having sufficient financial resources, and the time to search free from work, family, and childcare demands. Others searched at every opportunity for their missing loved one. Their best efforts and the passing of time, however, delivered no guarantees or certainty in terms of a 'positive' outcome or resolution of their loved one being missing.



## No Rituals, No Closure

The usual customs, rituals, and inherent understandings that guide everyday life, that mark significant events and help those impacted by trauma and loss, are often unavailable to those left behind (Families & Friends of Missing Persons, 2014; ICRC, 2010). Young people spoke of having no access to what Josh called ‘the natural process’ to mark their loved one being physically absent. The words below reflect the experiences of two young people and then of a parent, demonstrating that, regardless of age, the experience of living with not knowing is felt similarly.

We haven’t had a funeral ... the natural process. I don’t know. For me, it’s just kind of like I know he’s gone, Dad’s gone, but I think of him every day, so it’s kind of like there’s still a part of him that feels like he’s still there, because you haven’t actually seen them pass away. (Josh)

Will it get to the point where all of the generations have passed and forgotten about Laura? Because like when my nan ... when it’s her birthday, or just if I want to, I can go to the cemetery; I can visit her. (Amy)

When you talk about missing it’s very difficult. It’s not like a death, where you can have a service, and go through the grieving process. We can’t do that, at all. All we’ve got in our head is endless questions that I’ll never get answered – where, why, when, how? They just never get answered, and you live with that. (Donna)

There is no timeline, no set procedure or prescribed path in terms of when any particular physical or emotional event might occur in the experience of a loved one being missing. Young people and parents recognised the uncertainty and unpredictability of what followed their loved one going missing, in a process they and others in their family did not understand. Margot, reflecting on the disappearance of her father more than 30 years earlier, stated, ‘We still don’t have a proper end’. Megan’s words below reflect her experience of living with not knowing and of having no answers about her missing loved one.

She just had no ending. Every story has a beginning, a middle and an end, in my work and in my writing; and then Fiona is one of those people that has a beginning, but then not even really a middle, and definitely not an end.

The absence or unavailability of these natural processes, of being able to publicly remember their missing loved one, was deeply felt by young people. Some young people felt that their (young) age meant they were afforded less opportunity to be a part of conversations and decision-making processes about the nature and timing of events intended to acknowledge

their missing loved one. In some families, significant information about the missing person and missing persons events was withheld from others in the family. Those withholding the information were sometimes next of kin, and the reasons for the information being withheld were unclear. The reasons for this are possibly many and complex and might have been related to the age of those left behind, including young people, but parents reported that they, too, were aware of being excluded. This became, at times, a source of confusion, distress, and anger for many of them.

Several young people spoke about the presumption of death that was reached by some family members and investigators, without what they believed was concrete evidence or proof, and prior to the finalisation of the police investigation or coronial findings. Decisions were made about the timing of events, such as memorial services and legal proceedings, sometimes by those external to the family and with seemingly little or no consultation with those left behind, including – and, seemingly because of their age, especially – the young people. When outcomes were presumed and decisions were made, these caused considerable distress for the young people involved. Margot commented:

I had to accept the conclusion that searchers and my remaining parent had reached – that he was dead – when I was not ready. It was too soon [for a conclusion or a memorial] and there was no proof – a few short weeks after he was last seen.

I said to my mum recently, ‘Why did we never speak about him, remember him, why did we never get a plant, why did we never celebrate his life? Why was he not part of our lives anymore after he went missing?’

Young people voiced strong feelings about the timing or organisation of memorial services for their missing loved one. In their eyes, memorial services took on a similar meaning to that of funerals. In the absence of proof of what had happened to their missing loved one, they were both angered and distressed by the notion of a service that suggested their loved one was not going to return or was no longer alive. They did, however, want to – and should be able to – acknowledge their missing loved one and their life, to be able to express their feelings of sadness at their physical absence, and to continue to keep their missing loved one present in different ways. Two young people, Zara and Amy, a sibling and a cousin of the same missing person, spoke about living without definitive answers of what has happened to their missing loved one.

We continue to hope that it’s not she **was**, but still she **is**. (Zara)

But where do you go to mourn for Jane? Obviously not mourn in the ‘died’ sense but where do you go, mourning for her being gone? (Amy)

In circumstances where the missing person is located deceased, the view sometimes held by family members, and more often voiced by those more distant from those left behind, is that families in this situation achieve closure (Davies, 2012) – a belief reinforced by statements in media and by service providers. The assumption appears to be that finding the missing person brings answers to those left behind and that having the missing person physically returned ends the family’s search for answers, thus providing closure and allowing the family to move on. The answers that families seek might relate to why the loved one went missing, what happened while they were missing, and the circumstances surrounding their death. For the small number of families where the missing person is located deceased (Bricknell, 2017), many of these questions remain. Anecdotally, family members speak of continuing to search to understand what happened to their missing loved one and speak of having ‘more questions than answers’ (Allen, personal communication), and answers that are ‘not the ones we hoped to receive’ (David, personal communication).

The fate of two of the missing people was confirmed during the research period. It is important to continue to acknowledge the two missing people who were located deceased, and to acknowledge the families they left behind, four of whom are participants in this research. For their families, their questions were not resolved by the circumstances of their loved one being found, nor was the impact of having lived with not knowing erased by their being located. Megan, whose missing loved one was located deceased, spoke of being ‘in limbo’ and of trying to find a place of comfort – ‘a reasonably good space’ – while recognising her lack of control of the process: ‘I can try and control what’s going to come, and I can’t. I can’t do that. I can only do the best I can in this space.’ Far from providing an ending, young people responded with frustration and anger to the expectation and suggestion that they move on. Eliza reflected on a conversation with a friend, who had said to her, ‘Oh, just move on’:

It’s like using that word closure; it’s a bullshit contemporary term. It’s nothing. People don’t have closure. When someone dies, they just learn how to deal with their grief, and learn how to deal with someone’s absence. They learn how to adjust to the pain of missing someone. That’s not closure; that’s just dealing with it. When someone is missing, it’s never closure. There’s no finality to it. There is no determination as to what happened, someone is just not around anymore, and you don’t know.

At times, however, the young people reported it was these same people, those they hoped and expected might meet their information and support needs, including parents, grandparents and, later, partners, who were physically and/or emotionally unavailable. When this occurred, other individuals sometimes stepped in to fill the gap. Young people identified them as grandparents, step-parents, aunts or peers. If there was not someone available to meet these needs, young people spoke of feeling very much alone. For some, the need for recognition, information, inclusion and support was met from the very beginning of their loved one being missing; for others it was not; and for some, not until many years later.

There were times, too, when they moved forward in their lives as mostly ordinary young people, sometimes struggling, sometimes succeeding, and mostly meeting age-appropriate challenges and opportunities, all while finding ways to deal with the unexpected, extraordinary experience of their loved one being missing. The interviews revealed that for every young person there were very difficult times that followed their loved one going missing.

### **The Impact of a Loved One Going Missing**

The language the young people used to describe the impact of their loved one going missing is consistent with the language often used to describe the impact of a range of different trauma and loss experiences (De Bellis & Zisk, 2014; Herman, 1992). Young people spoke of feeling distressed, shocked and disbelieving, and feeling helpless to change or exercise any control over what was happening. Every young person described feelings that indicated their experience of their loved one going missing as a traumatic event; many of the parents shared similar words. While Will spoke of shock and disbelief when he became aware that his loved one was a missing person, both young people and parents described the continuing presence of such feelings. Will recalled, ‘I was aware of feeling like I wasn’t really here, a bit out of it. It was a shock and it just kind of didn’t register for a while.’

A parent, Sally, described her disbelief in the following way:

The hardest thing I found, just going ‘Oh my God!’ and I still do it, ‘this couldn’t have happened to us. It’s some sort of a dream or a movie, we’re going to wake up and go, that’s ok, that’s over now.’ And I still have that feeling, that couldn’t have happened, it didn’t happen to us, and it did. While it was happening, I used to think, this can’t be happening to my little family, it just can’t.

## Trauma and Loss

Feelings of shock combined understandably with feelings of sadness and grief, were present for every young person, regardless of age, and were reported by young people as being experienced by those around them. Some young people clearly recalled their distress and the distress of family members around them, without questioning that their own distress was anything other than a natural response. Like the adults around them, young people spoke of feeling overwhelmed and confused, and of not knowing how to respond when told their loved one was missing. They spoke of feelings of sadness and of being acutely aware of the physical absence of their loved one and its impact on them and many of those around them. Will described his experience as slightly different, and perhaps delayed, compared to his observations of others within his family.

Mum was crying a lot and Zara broke down too; Dad was a bit upset. I don't really know what happened with me ... kind of didn't really click with me for a while, so I don't think that I really reacted to it as much you would think.

Every young person spoke of feelings of sadness, although not all young people used the term. Some spoke of wanting and trying to maintain feelings of hope for a positive outcome for their missing loved one. Others identified reminders of their missing loved one that would trigger thoughts of them; however, most of the young people and the parents described thoughts of their loved one occurring frequently. Amy described her experience.

Still quite often, I'll see a video or photo, and something will remind me of Jane, or something she used to do, and that will get me thinking about her. Often there are situations when I'm just walking around, and she will just pop into my head. It's not like every single day she's coming into my head but I still know that my mum and Belle [Jane's mother], they think about her everyday. (Amy)

The sadness is still around the time she went missing, her birthday and that, on events where we have memories with her, it still gets a bit grey in the house; but the rest of the year we're happier and more upbeat, it's been a lot longer now. The feelings are not gone, but it's better. We really don't have to think about it all the time. (Will)

Several young people described their experiences of hypervigilance, a trauma response not confined to the loss of a missing loved one and often reported following other traumatic experiences (De Bellis & Zisk, 2014). One young person described being on the 'lookout' (Zara) for her missing loved one. Young people spoke of scanning groups of people on the street, in shopping centres, and railway stations. Debra described believing she had seen her

father at a train station, having her view obstructed by a train and when the train was gone, her father was not there. At other times images and memories quite randomly occurred. Young people spoke of dreaming about their missing loved one, and for some these dreams were nightmarish in quality. Margot described ‘horrific, violent’ nightmares relating to what had happened to her father that began soon after he went missing and lasted for a year.

Some young people reported that their initial feelings of disbelief were accompanied by feelings of optimism and hope for a positive outcome in terms of the return of their missing loved one. As time passed these feelings were sometimes accompanied by fears of a less positive outcome. Amy described her experience of this: ‘At first, I thought. “She’ll be back”. Then when she wasn’t, I had this dawning realisation – “Oh, this is serious”.’ Although such fears for the safety of the missing person were felt, they were often not spoken or shared readily with others in the family.

The ongoing nature of living with not knowing meant that the signs of trauma they spoke about in the earliest days of their loved one being a missing person continued to be experienced by many of them many years later. While young people reported that their own feelings of grief did not diminish over time, nor was their loss any less acutely felt, they observed similar reactions in others, both young people and adults. Amy and Zara described feelings of shock and distress continuing for years after their loved one went missing.

I felt like I was in shock and the shock’s never gone away. I’ve just sort of learnt to have it there. (Amy)

Posters still affect me. I wasn’t expecting the poster to be there, and it upset me. We went [on a school trip] and when we were coming back, we were in the port and there was a missing persons poster with my sister on it. I started crying and we went outside, and I told my friend about her. (Zara)

Zara then described her observations of her mother’s ongoing grief: ‘She always cries at the Missing Persons Week church service. Things like that come up and she’s really sad. I know she still thinks about her every day.’

## **Anxiety**

Young people did not immediately name anxiety as one of the feelings that resulted from their loved one going missing. As they matured, they did, however, identify the frequent presence of anxiety in their lives. Parents, too, described events that could not be explained in any other way.

The parents of a young person recalled an incident which they believed was an indicator of their then 15-year-old daughter's anxiety. Lisa's parents believed her anxiety and distress stemmed from her uncle's disappearance more than a decade earlier. The following scene was described by Lisa's parents, Ryan and Linda, with Lisa present as they had requested to be interviewed together. Prior to the semi-structured interview, Linda had sought support from FFMPU in relation to Lisa's anxiety. The three members of the same family described the following:

I picked her up from school. I went to the bank and Lisa agreed to wait in the car. I came back to the car and she was hysterical. I had only been out of sight for a few minutes. She was so upset, she couldn't find the words to explain what had happened, but I worked it out.

(Ryan)

The biggest thing I remember about Lisa was the fear – the fear of losing us, and her anxiety was huge as a result. (Linda)

I had really bad anxiety, huge anxiety. (Lisa)

Other young people recalled intense feelings of anxiety at different times throughout their adult lives, sometimes triggered by particular events and at other times, occurring quite randomly. For Margot, her anxiety escalated when one of her daughters attained a similar age to her own age at the time of her father going missing. Margot described feelings of intense anxiety that led to her seeking mental health support.

Debra described feeling worried and anxious when she became aware of whispered conversations and felt she was being excluded from information that pertained to her missing father. She stated, 'If you don't tell me and I hear people whispering I think something bad has happened'. Young people spoke of imagined outcomes when information was absent or withheld, and of filling in the gaps in their knowledge of what might have happened to their missing loved one with information that was often more traumatic or suggested a worse outcome than what was actually known. Margot perceptively recalled:

I didn't get a lot of information from anyone, which was probably why I had the nightmares.

I made the information up in my own mind because I was trying to subconsciously figure it out ... to fill in the gaps.

## **Remaining Silent**

While young people described similar feelings of distress and grief regardless of age, other differences set their experience apart from that of the adults within their family. Young

people were acutely aware that they did not always share the opinions or conclusions reached by others, including their parents and some service providers, about their missing loved one. Differences of opinion and conclusions reached about the missing person became a source of tension, especially when the young person felt they were expected to believe or at least agree with such an opinion. Young people discovered that if a parent held a view different to their own, in terms of what had become of the missing person, or the way others made meaning of the loss, such differences led to a failure to recognise the young person's distress and, subsequently, the support they were offered. When such differences of opinion arose, several young people spoke about choosing to remain silent, while others spoke of isolating themselves from family members and peers. They reported that they stopped talking to each other and stopped asking questions of anyone about their missing loved one, despite thinking constantly about him or her. Margot spoke of her decision to remain silent when she realised that her understanding of what might have happened to her missing loved one was different to the opinion held by her parent in the following way.

My mother's view was that he was dead, so that was her answer, and needless to say, I never spoke about him to her again. Her opinion was cut and dried – he's gone; this is what happened.

I had to support her view or keep quiet, so I kept quiet. (Margot)

A dissonance in the way individuals expressed their grief or coped with the loss of their missing loved one occurred in some families. This had the potential to become a source of tension and distress, leading to young people feeling judged, unheard, or unsupported in their grief (Toller & Braithwaite, 2009). When this occurred, their support needs were often unrecognised and therefore unmet. Margot described her own and her sibling's experience within their family.

We weren't allowed to 'not know'; that is, we had to reach a conclusion that our father was dead. Being allowed to not know, that's something my brother and I weren't allowed to do. My mother told us after two weeks, 'That's it, he's dead'. It was all over with. (Margot)

In other families, recognising the physical absence and/or the psychological presence of their missing loved one within the family appeared to be discouraged, and a source of considerable distress for adults and young people. This led in some families to a breakdown in 'two-way communication' (Tara). Another young person, Eliza, described her parents as 'just devastated [and] in such a difficult space themselves', while Tara described the impact on her parents of the loss of their missing child as 'catastrophic'. Young people spoke of wanting to



ask questions about what was happening with regard to their missing loved one and the police investigation but remaining silent to avoid exacerbating the distress and grief they were aware their parents were experiencing. Tara recalled: ‘We were so conscious of not provoking, not causing any grief, any distress, that to ask—I think we just realised very quickly that to ask you might cause distress, so we didn’t ask.’

## **Loneliness and Isolation**

To some extent isolated within their family, many young people were also aware that their situation was unique among their peers and that few understood their experience. At the time of their loved one going missing, neither the young person nor anyone else in their family had prior knowledge or understanding of what being a missing person actually meant. They knew no one, apart from others within their immediate family who were in the same situation, who had ever experienced the loss of a missing person. Josh said, ‘I felt like I was the only 13-year-old anywhere whose dad was missing’.

Young people were acutely aware that no one in their family knew what to do or how to proceed from the point in time of realising their loved one was missing. Several young people spoke of feeling emotionally disconnected from one or both parents when their parents became either physically absent as a result of searching for the missing loved one or psychologically absent in their grief. One young person spoke of feeling rejected, and of being ‘pushed away’ when she sought support and comfort from her parent. Tara recalled:

She distanced herself. She ceased doing the sorts of things she had done previously. I remember she pushed me away not so long after Mark disappeared. I was trying to give her a hug and she said ‘No, you’re too old for that’, and that was the last time she hugged me.

With the physical absence of her parents who were ‘absolutely relentless in trying to find’ their missing son, Tara recalled finding ‘another channel of communication’ for herself and her siblings through her grandmother, who recognised their need for information and became for Tara ‘the least distressing way to get information’.

Feelings of isolation and loneliness related also to the young person’s experience of being physically abandoned by their missing loved one and doubting that anyone else they knew was able to understand what they were experiencing – a feeling of being emotionally alone and uncared for. Margot recalled:

My father going missing left me with a parent I felt didn't value me and didn't want to hear what I had to say. I grew up as a person with different ideas and different ways of functioning [to the parent who remained].

While all of the young people reported similar feelings of loneliness and isolation in terms of living with missing, this was more keenly felt when the loss of their loved one felt unrecognised by others and support was not offered. Margot and Tara both spoke of feeling alone with their grief and loss.

We moved house and we moved schools. People I knew didn't know him, so I couldn't remember him with anybody; and my mother didn't want to. So, he was just completely removed from our lives in every respect. No one at school knew and I couldn't talk to anyone about it. (Margot)

Mum didn't want us to ever bring friends home. She didn't like anybody; she didn't like any of our friends [after Mark went missing]. (Tara)

For Tara, being separated from one of her siblings compounded her feelings of distress and isolation. She was attempting to cope with the loss of her missing brother, the emotional and physical separation from her parents, and then the separation from her sister, recalling: 'I remember feeling so guilty that she wasn't with me. No one recognised that loss. There was so little willingness to understand mental health issues because they might have to take a bit of responsibility'.

The young people's words provide a powerful insight into their own experience and the experience of those around them. They described being watchful of the dynamics occurring between family members, and of noticing how others in their family reacted to particular situations or events. While they were mindful of their family members trying to protect them, to avoid further distress, young people were very aware of changes within their families.

## **Changed Families**

Young people described their families and relationships as 'shattered' (Tara) as a result of their loved one going missing. With their missing loved one at the centre of the changes that ensued, the ripple effect of their loved one going missing was experienced intergenerationally. A number of the young people expressed the belief that the moment of their loved one going missing changed their experience of being a child in their family, especially in terms of their feelings of happiness and belonging. Tara, whose brother went missing, described the impact of his disappearance on the previously 'idyllic' family life she and her siblings had known.

It was shattered; it was totally obliterated – life as we'd known it. All the pieces fragmented, and they never fitted together properly again, and that cloak of sadness just sat over everything. We tiptoed around trying not to cause any grief. I guess we didn't know what to do – feeling powerless to put the pieces back together and powerless to help Mum get over the grief, to help Mum physically.

The young people reported that while they sometimes felt overlooked or excluded from the information that was shared among adults in the family, they were nonetheless acutely aware and observant of the behaviour and reactions of others, and the impact on those they were closest to relationally and physically. Young people spoke of their awareness of the changes within their families, which at times extended to their peer groups and social networks. Young people were aware of this change both for those who were left behind and for those who were born later. They expressed an awareness that the loss of the missing loved one and the resultant grief impacted not just those physically present at the time of their loved one going missing, but also relationships and bonds with those who came later. Linda, Lisa's mother, spoke of her daughter's sadness for her younger brother, who was born after her uncle went missing: 'Later, after he was born, Lisa started to ask questions. She was upset that her brother didn't know Uncle David.'

Not all of the young people's observations and experiences in relationships were negative. Some recalled that children born after their loved one's disappearance brought feelings of happiness and a sense of hope. Tara, whose experience was of emotional distancing from her own mother, recalled her mother's response to her grandchildren, Tara's children.

My son was devastated when she died because he is such a loving person. She absolutely adored him and he her. They used to sleep together all the time when he was little, and she said to me 'Now I really understand about bonding'. I think what she was saying was that she allowed herself to open up completely again.

Young people spoke of being aware of their parents and grandparents being fearful. This occurred in families of young people where their sibling was the missing person. (It is important to keep in mind that the youngest missing person in this research was 16 years of age at the time of going missing and the other missing children were in their late teens or early 20s.) Young people understood this fear as fear for the safety of the missing loved one, combined with the fear that another young person might be taken from the family, or go missing. Tara's words capture this fear:

Fear of loving us and losing one of us. Our mother was always angry. I think my mother was afraid that the same might happen to [another child and Tara's sibling] and she couldn't cope with that. My mother feared loving us after Mark went missing.

The three statements that follow reflect the young person's awareness of the impact within their family and their feelings of powerlessness, and, at times, of wanting to protect their parents:

My mother screamed at my father to turn the car around ... we all sat terrified and quietly in the back. (Tara)

I guess we didn't know what to do; feeling powerless to put the pieces back together and powerless to help Mum get over the grief, to help Mum physically. So, then we ended up not doing anything, not knowing what our roles were. (Tara)

I wasn't going to tell them [parents] exactly where I was at emotionally because they were just devastated. They were in such a difficult space themselves, so you don't want to add to that. Part of it was protecting them. (Eliza)

Young people spoke of wanting to ask for information, of having unanswered questions, and of watching their parents and their interactions with each other, friends and investigators. Many spoke of being aware of waiting for information, of walking on eggshells and trying not to cause distress or upset, but feeling as though their mere presence, in some circumstances, was a trigger for distress and an interruption to the priority of searching for the missing loved one. Several young people spoke of being mindful of showing emotion – emotion that suggested either positive or negative feelings. Tara recalled:

This terrible thing had happened, and everything had changed, and attention or recognition had to be given to that, and by laughing you were not recognising the seriousness of the situation.

Young people viewed their responses to their loved one going missing as normal, understandable responses. They expressed the belief that their responses required understanding and acceptance rather than being an indicator of their need to be protected from or shielded from what was known about their missing loved one.

### **A Continuing Presence**

Without understanding that those left behind continue to live with ambiguity, and do so in different ways, there can be little understanding or compassion for their experience. Young

people spoke about trying to make sense of and hold onto the continuing psychological presence of their missing loved one.

The young people spoke of very different experiences in the way their missing loved one was acknowledged and the ways they were permitted to remember that person. Some spoke of learning quickly which adults and others in their lives were receptive to them talking about and sharing memories of their missing loved ones, and which were not. They were very aware of the response of those around them – of those who were similarly distressed and those who appeared to be less affected and distressed by the missing person's disappearance. One young person, Tara, formed the conclusion that talking about her missing brother, and asking questions, was a source of distress that caused 'too much grief' for some family members, while at the same time acknowledging that she needed to talk and be permitted to ask questions about her missing loved one.

Whether the adults they were closest to were highly distressed or appeared relatively unaffected, there seemed little recognition of the impact on the young person and their need to talk about and remember their missing loved one. Being allowed to remember their missing loved one, to mention them by name, and to speak of their memories was not just important but affirming of the young person's grief.

Young people spoke of their efforts to keep their missing loved one psychologically close and present. In some families their memories and the making of memories was acknowledged, affirmed and supported by parents and other family members through talking with and listening to the young person, the sharing of photos and, sometimes, just being physically and emotionally present, without conversation in their lives. Will recalled:

One time I was having a lot of trouble, so I went to my friend's house and we went to the park and he just listened to my whole story then tried to make me feel better, but just being able to get the whole story out takes a big load off.

Having photos, mementos, and belongings of their missing loved one in a place that others might see them and being supported in doing so by the adults around them became a source of comfort and a means of tacitly demonstrating the presence of their missing loved one for each young person. A young person, Josh, and a parent, Sally, shared their experience of this.

I suppose maybe it's like easier to have photos of my dad, 'cause then people ask the question and it's easier to say well he's missing... that's more natural. (Josh)

In her room she [Debra] has lots of photos, very visible, little cards he wrote her. She took some of them [overseas] to decorate the room and just to have them with her. The whole back room at home is full of Simon. (Sally)

## **Summary**

This chapter explicated two themes – recognising young people and living with not knowing, and the threads within each theme. In their stories young people described the impact of their loved one going missing from the time of learning they were missing, struggling with the difficult experiences that followed, the many changes they were aware of both for themselves and observed within their family. They described struggling, at times, to make sense of and cope with the loss. When those closest to the young person failed to recognise their presence and their needs they were impacted negatively and yet at other times they found understanding, recognition, and support. In Chapter 7 there is further explanation of the theme of recognising young people in the context of informing them of what has happened, keeping them informed and acknowledging difficult conversations. Another theme, a growing awareness, will also be introduced and explicated.

# **CHAPTER 7**

## **YOUNG PEOPLE SEARCHING FOR ANSWERS AND FINDING MEANING**

### **Introduction**

This chapter delves further into the theme of recognising young people and introduces a new theme – a growing awareness. Within the theme of recognising young people, the main threads discussed are keeping them informed, their views on being able to access information, their observation of the search for their missing loved one, and their interactions with the adults and service providers around them. Within the theme of a growing awareness, making memories and meaning, remembering more than a missing person, recognising difficulties prior to going missing, and being allowed to be young people are explicated. A growing awareness relates to young people learning more about their missing loved one and themselves, and the meaning for those left behind of their loved one going missing. It will delve into the changes they experienced, and their search for information, understanding and support.

### **Recognising Young People**

In the previous chapter, one thread within the theme of recognising young people was introduced. This thread was the point in time that each young person learned their loved one was a missing person. As the first milestone in the experience of living with the loss of a missing loved one, it was important to introduce it before discussing the impact of all that followed for each young person. What follows is a discussion of how young people experienced being told, the difficult conversations that followed, and the observations young people made of what was happening around them.

### **Keeping Young People Informed**

Boss (2006) describes the loss of a missing loved one as incomprehensible, and individuals, families and, more broadly, communities as trying to make sense of what has occurred. This dynamic of wanting to understand starts at the point in time when the loved one is first physically missed, and the young person is informed that their loved one is a missing person. Even at that point, families report there are understandably many more questions than

answers, and greater uncertainty about what might have happened than what is actually known. While this research does not examine the factors that might contribute to a person going missing, all of the young people nevertheless spoke of trying to make sense of what had caused their loved one to become a missing person.

In any situation where a loved one is missing, the search to locate the missing person understandably takes absolute priority. Young people observed and described their parents' efforts to do all within their power to locate their missing loved one. In some families, their efforts to find answers led to active ongoing searching, discussion, and speculation. Young people observed this dynamic within their families, and lived it themselves, as they attempted to understand what was happening with their missing loved one. Young people had similar questions to those of most adults, questions that related to trying to understand what was happening in terms of the investigation and the search efforts, and what was happening within their families as a result of their loved one being missing. However, the young people were reliant on adults being physically and psychologically present and available, willing to be asked questions, and prepared to try to answer those questions. Belle, the mother of Will and Zara, explained her reasons for informing and including her children even when many questions remained unanswered.

That would mean that they'd never be told because we don't know the facts about what's going on. No, that seems counterintuitive to me and doesn't look after them, it really insults the children because they are intelligent and if it's explained in the right language, it helps them cope rather than sheltering them, thinking we're sheltering them from it by not telling them.

The words of one service provider reflected what most respondents said regarding their feelings of responsibility when speaking to children about their missing loved one: 'I think it's everyone's responsibility to ask how they're going and to ensure that there is someone who is available to them, and able to support them'. This response also indicates that service providers recognise, as did some young people, that there were adults who, while physically present, were at times psychologically absent because they were overwhelmed themselves by the impact of their loved one going missing. This related to the notion that sometimes those closest to the young person did not recognise their need for support, thus resulting in parents or other caregivers being emotionally unavailable and unable to support the young person.



## **‘Tell Me What You Know’**

Young people were very clear about wanting to be in the presence of others who understood and shared their feelings. They expressed the belief that it was better to be informed that their loved one was missing and be given the available information than to be told something untrue or misleading in an attempt to protect them or because the answers were unknown. The words of one young person, Debra, were shared with other young people in an In the Loop support group meeting and express what all of the young people thought: ‘Please tell me what’s happening. Even if you don’t have all the answers, tell me what you know.’

While young people acknowledged that their capacity to understand the complexity of all that was happening was in part determined by their age, none of them expressed the belief that their youth was sufficient reason for information about their missing loved one to be withheld. Neither did they express the wish, despite feeling upset, to have not been told. Being informed and included was validating for young people. Will’s perceptive words are evidence of his acceptance that being young naturally limited his understanding of the complex issues at play and that being informed was validating of his position in the family:

I think I wasn’t told the extent of everything because I was so young [13] and with mental health I didn’t understand. As I got older, I think mum thought I could handle the situation, so the older I got the more information I was given about what was going on.

In some families, those left behind realised that information was at times withheld by those identified as the next of kin. While not understanding why this occurred, the experience was similarly invalidating for adults and young people. The parents in one family spoke about a hierarchy emerging in terms of who was recognised and included as part of the grieving family. Access to information and inclusion in events intended to acknowledge missing loved ones and those left behind was controlled and, at times, blocked when the next of kin decided who would be informed about what was happening. This apparent hierarchy of grief sometimes lead to misunderstandings of how to express, and who was permitted to express, feelings of grief. When this occurred in families, young people were often excluded. Linda, the sister-in-law of a missing person, described how she, her husband, and their daughter Lisa, experienced the feeling of being disenfranchised by this hierarchy.

She [another family member] has a strict hierarchy of grieving ... that’s how children get put in the outer circle. My family were devastated when David went missing. I asked about a memorial. She [next of kin] said, ‘No, just family.’ We can’t begin to imagine her pain and loss ... but I feel frustrated that she can’t let others in.

Parents who were mindful of the young person's age, spoke of struggling to articulate difficult and sensitive information; however, no parent expressed the opinion that young people should not be told about their loved one being a missing person. Several parents expressed the belief that 'explicit' (Carol) detail was not necessary or helpful for their young people. The uncertain circumstances and unknown outcomes surrounding the loved one going missing were recognised by both parents and young people. Parents spoke of trying to understand what had and was happening, so that while age might have played some part in comprehending what had happened, the bigger issue was that anyone, of any age, affected by the loss of a missing person found the loss complex, difficult and sometimes incomprehensible. Carol spoke of informing her children that their grandfather, her father, was missing while acknowledging how little information she had and being mindful of the detail of information she shared with them.

So, I was happy to tell them that something had happened, and [their grandfather] had gone missing and we didn't know where he was. But they knew that he wasn't well, and it was all on that premise, that he wasn't well, and that was why I had gone to be with him ... and then he sort of wandered off and we don't know where he is.

Young people expressed the belief that information needed to be given to them in a timely manner and as soon as it became known. This was not always the reality for young people, who were able to articulate that this delay caused further distress. Margot reinforced the need for timely information: 'I think had I known all those details beforehand I wouldn't have spent years waiting for him to come back, but I wasn't told.'

In asking to be told what was known about the search for their missing loved one, one young person spoke of wanting 'two-way communication' (Tara) between her parents and herself and her siblings. She reflected on their need to be provided with information about their missing brother and on the realisation that her parents were unable to meet that need. When this occurred, Tara, like other young people, searched for others within or outside their family. In Tara's family, her grandmother became that person. This occurred in a number of families, with another family member filling the gap when parents were unavailable.

Every young person expressed the belief that they could 'handle it' (Will) – that they could cope with being told the truth. They disagreed with the view they suspected some held that difficult information should not be given to young people. Their belief was supported by the majority of service providers in Study 3, whose view was that, regardless of age, young people needed to be recognised and informed: 'It's not ok to say they're too young, or [that] they'll ask if they want to know.' As previously stated, some young people did acknowledge

that their capacity to understand the complexity of the situation was possibly limited by their age. Will surmised:

As it [the length of time missing] got a bit longer, and after I turned about 11, I started getting the news of whatever was happening around it. Mum would talk about it, and we'd hear what the police had been doing recently ... or if mum had contacted them, all the things that happened that could possibly be Jane, mum got told and she would always tell us. We were never really left out of it. She kept us up to date and told us what was going on.

Young people accepted that their age precluded them from being the first point of contact with service providers; however, they believed that the adults who did have access to information about their missing loved one had a responsibility to ensure that information was conveyed to them. This applied to information from police and in relation to other legal proceedings, regarding which information often became available through media and social media. They spoke with clarity of wanting to be included and informed – to be kept in the loop – from the beginning and throughout the investigation, including through coronial proceedings and for as long as their loved one was a missing person. One young person, Margot, stated her belief that having the truth about the circumstances of her father's disappearance withheld from her had exacerbated her feelings of distress and negatively impacted both her emotional well-being and functioning.

### **'A Difficult Conversation'**

Quite early in the experience of their loved one going missing most, but not all, of the young people identified one or more adults within their family they believed they could trust and go to for information about their missing loved one. They learned about who was available, both physically and emotionally, to each of them through asking questions and observing those around them. While every young person was informed by a family member that their loved one was missing, they became aware of who recognised their presence within the family and who was prepared to answer their questions and acknowledge the missing loved one.

Debra spoke of what she believed to be her right to be told about her missing father. All of the parents interviewed, and some service providers, expressed a similar belief – that the young person had a right to be informed and an adult close to the young person was the appropriate person to inform the young person, and then to provide ongoing information. While every parent interviewed expressed the belief that it was necessary for their young person to be informed about their missing loved one, all acknowledged that it had been 'a difficult conversation' (Sally) – difficult because of their own feelings of being overwhelmed, distressed

and uncertain, and of feeling ill-equipped to have such a conversation. Parents spoke about searching for the ‘right words’ to explain such a difficult situation, one for which they felt completely unprepared. Sally described wanting to ‘protect’ her daughter, to support her to ‘move through it with the least amount of trauma and pain’ and to be emotionally available for her, saying: ‘No matter where I am in the world, I’m there for you.’

Parents described rehearsing their words in preparation for the difficult conversation to inform their child about their missing loved one. Nell recalled:

The phone kept ringing. He knew something was going on, but I thought how am I going to tell the boy that his dad has disappeared? He could turn up you know, maybe. And in the end, I pulled him aside and he said, ‘I knew there was something wrong. I knew there was something going on.’ And I said, ‘I just had to wait until I had the right time to tell you.’

Parents spoke of the added challenge of how best to communicate difficult and sometimes graphic information to their young person. Most agreed that there needed to be some moderation of the details that were given. Carol spoke of the caution she exercised in terms of explaining her father’s disappearance to her children: ‘I would have kept it very simple – “He wasn’t very well; he wasn’t himself and he wandered off”.’

Such information was sometimes published on news media or social media, and, for parents, containing this information posed an even greater challenge. One parent recalled being particularly mindful of the graphic wording of a newspaper article describing the location of a missing person’s remains. The challenge for parents became how to inform the young person in a sensitive and age-appropriate manner. At times, parents sought support about how to deliver this information, while acknowledging that the need for information given to the young person did not end when they were informed their loved one was missing. Parents contacted support services for young people or spoke to staff in the young person’s school. In a number of FFMPU’s support group meetings, parents of young people raised their concerns and questions about how to talk with their young person about their missing loved one. For parents, being able to connect with others in a similar situation assisted not just in exchanging information, but also in reducing the anxiety parents felt about talking with their young person (Families & Friends of Missing Persons, 2016b).

Parents who appeared more comfortable with the concept of ambiguity and recognised that ambiguity was a part of all that was happening also seemed to feel less pressure to answer their young person’s questions definitively, and more able to say, ‘We just don’t know’ (Belle).

When parents and young people found a sense of comfort or acceptance with not having every answer, they felt less pressured to obtain the facts and were better able to live with not knowing.

### **Young people's awareness of the investigation**

The investigation into the loved one's disappearance technically began when a missing person report was lodged with police. The person making this report was in most instances a family member. It could, however, have been a friend or a service provider if that person were the first to become concerned for the safety or welfare of the missing person. All except the youngest of the young people were aware of the gravity of making a missing person report to police and of the response from service providers. As young people, they were no less aware of the impact on their parents and what they perceived as the value accorded their missing loved one. They wanted to know that their loved one's disappearance and the subsequent investigation were being treated as seriously and respectfully by service providers, including police, coronial professionals, and the media, as by themselves and their families. Tara recalled with distress and anger her disillusionment with those outside her immediate family, feeling that service providers had failed to treat her brother's disappearance with the gravity she believed it deserved. This disillusionment, a feeling shared by other young people and family members, increased feelings of powerlessness and further disenfranchised those left behind.

Well, the hospital didn't inform Mum and Dad for 24 hours that he was missing; and my parents said straightaway, 'Have you informed the police?' and they said 'No'. Dad said, 'I'm coming straight down to Sydney; you inform the police' ... and he got to Sydney and discovered that the hospital still hadn't informed the police; so it was two days between when Mark disappeared ... and the police were informed, which was the first of their many... well not inappropriate, but yes I guess they were inappropriate. There were all sorts of things that happened along the way that were inconsistent with good practice.

From the time of the missing person report young people observed their families' interactions with service providers. Knowing that investigators were maintaining contact with their parents, or other next of kin, was reassurance for the young person and the adults involved that their loved one's disappearance mattered. Several young people spoke of being acutely aware of their parents' feelings of tension and anxiety as they waited for information; they were aware, too, of the disappointment and anguish that resulted when the phone call was not received. The young people shared their parents' feelings of powerlessness and felt powerless to assist in a way that they hoped might bring some comfort to their parents. While young people spoke of a 'serious situation' (Amy) at home, some came to the conclusion that their

distress was unrecognised by, or of little concern to, investigators. Two young people expressed feeling powerless at what they perceived to be little engagement, assistance or active searching on the part of investigators.

It always felt to me like they were not looking for her ... like they're just keeping an eye out because it's been so long. (Zara)

My impression was that initially there was nothing we could really do. Dad was frustrated with the lack of support ... I would ask, but I just felt like for Dad it was hitting his head up against a brick wall, and that was just exacerbating the turmoil that he was in. (Eliza)

When the police were perceived to be active rather than 'not doing much' (Eliza), and the investigation appeared to be systematic rather than 'inconsistent with good practice' (Tara), the concern the young people felt for their parents was lessened. Feeling that investigators recognised the family's distress and concern for their missing loved one conveyed the message that police were committed and taking the investigation seriously. However, this was not always the case. Eliza recalled: 'I guess I never really believed they were doing much. That was my impression via Dad, until he met a constable he felt would really listen and seriously hear him. I was just glad that he was feeling listened to.' Police officers who were perceived as 'prepared to listen' (Eliza) and families who feeling able to 'check in' (Megan) offered reassurance that police were doing all they could to locate the missing person. Regular, consistent communication that ensured families were kept 'in the loop ... at every milestone' (Megan) was valued even when the investigation did not result in the missing loved one being located.

After the initial missing person's report, the investigation continued through the search period and eventually, for the majority of families participating in this research, the coronial court process. Young people very clearly articulated their wish to be kept informed at every step. Young people were aware that their age was, understandably, a significant factor in their communication with, and access to information from, service providers. On a few occasions service providers recognised the importance of ensuring that young people received information. When service providers were accessible to young people or via their immediate family, the young people felt recognised and included. Debra attended a missing persons event with a number of young people and met a coronial professional who listened to her request for information about the coronial process and her missing father; she noted that 'Mr M [coronial professional] told me I could receive information about court through my mum'. This was both validating and comforting given Debra's opinion and the experience of other young people that

being excluded from or denied information was more distressing than receiving difficult information about their missing loved one. In a number of families, parents and grandparents ensured the young person was informed about news as it arrived.

Greater access to information about the investigation occurred as young people matured. Young people who described this happening understood their parents' recognition of the young person's increasing capacity to cope with information about their missing loved one. Zara, one of the youngest research participants at the time of interview and at the time of her loved one going missing, reported, 'I wasn't aware of what they were doing. No, I never really heard about that sort of stuff', whereas her brother, Will, who was three years older, described being aware that he was 'kept up to date' as he matured.

### **A Growing Awareness**

The theme of a growing awareness explores the experience of young people as they continued to live with not knowing after being informed that their loved one was a missing person. Young people searched to understand all aspects of the missing person experience, beginning with what has been the subject of missing persons research in the past – the who, what and why of missingness. Boss (2011, p. 2) writes about ambiguous loss: 'Without meaning, it's hard to cope'. Every young person participating in the research told stories that described their struggle to cope, to understand, and to make meaning of what they saw, heard, and felt. The young people understood that the loss of the missing loved one was experienced in different ways by those around them. These differences in each young person's and parent's experience arose from the relationship each had shared with their missing loved one and other family members.

### **Making Memories and Meaning**

The stories the young people told contained both vivid memories and mere glimpses of their missing loved one and the family life they led before and following their loved one going missing. The magnitude of that moment in time and the reverberations felt within their families were significant. The point in time of their loved one going missing became a pivotal moment in their lives. 'We measure our lives by before and after [Jane going missing]. It's been going on for so long; it's just always been there, and for most of my adult life' (Amy).

The one who had become the missing person in the family, whether parent, grandparent, sibling, uncle or cousin, was remembered at times in very different ways. Whether

remembering was encouraged or not, each young person held those memories closely and, at times, protectively. Just as each family had responded differently to the ambiguity of their loved one being a missing person, the way these memories were articulated and shared differed too. In families where there was greater recognition and understanding of ambiguity, there were greater opportunities for remembering – for making memories and meaning. Margot recalled making memories with her daughters as she had felt unable to do at the same age.

There was never ... a particular time; I've just have always talked about him. I mean they've asked me questions about how he died, and I told them, because I can't remember a particular time, when I sat them down and said this is what happened to your grandfather. I've just always spoken about him, always mentioned things at age-appropriate times, so yeah, he's just been part of the conversation.

Differences also arose as a result of the relationship the young person had shared with their missing loved one, in terms of frequency of contact, closeness, emotional intimacy and sharing of sometimes deeply personal information. While the extent and nature of memories, both positive and negative, differed the sharing of memories between siblings, parents, and extended family remained important for the young people.

Young people spoke about trying to make sense of and hold onto the continuing psychological presence of their missing loved one through talking about and sharing memories. They spoke of very different experiences in the way their missing loved one was acknowledged by other family members and their friends and in the way they were permitted to remember that person. Some learned quickly which adults and others in their lives were receptive to them talking about and sharing memories of their missing loved ones. Eliza recalled her parents' ability to be present for their children after her brother went missing: 'That they could focus their attention on the rest of the family after he was gone. They could still be present. My appreciation for human resilience in general has just like grown.'

Young people were very aware of the responses of those around them, of those who were distressed, as they were, and those who appeared to be less affected by the missing person's disappearance. While most young people acknowledged that talking about their missing loved one evoked feelings of distress, not talking or feeling silenced did not avert such feelings. Whether the adults they were closest to were highly distressed or appeared relatively unaffected, in some families there seemed little recognition of the young person's grief and their need to talk about and remember their missing loved one. Being allowed to remember their missing loved one, to mention them by name, and to speak of their memories was not just



important but affirming of the young person's grief. Young people spoke of their efforts to keep their missing loved one psychologically close and present. In some families their memories and the making of memories was acknowledged, affirmed, and supported by parents and other family members through talking with and listening to the young person, the sharing of photos and, sometimes, just being physically and emotionally present. Carol spoke of her daughter joining with her in reminiscing about her grandfather.

It's interesting listening to her now because she will say things like 'Remember when Poppy did this', or 'That's when we went and did this with Poppy'. So, she remembers him quite well and the things that he used to do. Some of those memories were kept alive because we had been going through the house and going on the boat. We've got lots of photos and all that stuff. It's quite a different thing now because obviously they're older.

Another family spoke of reminiscing about their missing daughter and sibling using imaginary situations to explain her absence from their midst and to help sustain them in living with not knowing. Belle recalled the passing of time and how their remembering changed.

We'd talk about scenarios; about she'd be okay. Sometimes we'd make up stories that would carry us through for a few weeks. So, when she went off with a friend for a few weeks ... and that she went overseas skiing.

We started doing that probably a couple of months after. We don't still do it, but the skiing one lasted for a long time. It gave us a place to put our feelings. If I was preparing a meal or something and a feeling would get me down, I'd go 'Oh she's skiing', and I could put it aside for a while and go back to what I was doing.

Young people also identified occurrences and events that triggered a range of emotions and memories of their missing loved one. The triggers related to events that held meaning for the young person with regard to their missing loved one – many of which were similarly experienced by the adults. Significant life events were triggers for further distress; Father's Day, birthdays, funerals were all reminders of the significance and magnitude of the loss of their missing loved one. For Margot, her own daughter reaching the age she was at the time her own father went missing was a trigger for anxiety and fear as she relived her experience of being left behind by the person she felt cared for her most.

Several young people spoke of the continuing impact on themselves and others in their family of reported sightings of their missing loved and phone calls that prompted further memories and strong emotion. Eliza explained: 'The sighting and stuff is definitely full on, and you wonder when it's gonna stop and it doesn't. It never stops.' Zara spoke about 'feeling

really sad' when a reported sighting raised her hopes and then dashed them. Such triggers affected not only the young person but those around them, and the atmosphere in their home. Zara described what followed a sighting.

The mood definitely changes, and I think for a couple of days after that we're all quiet, except the house is normally quiet, but I don't think there's much chat. We just get on with it, just a bit quieter, a bit more sombre.

## **More Than a Missing Person**

For the young people participating in this research, it was an opportunity to speak about their loved one, their experience, and their memories. Young people spoke of the positive impact of observing and being a part of the acknowledgement of their missing loved one. They wanted to be able to speak of their lived experience and of their loved one, before and after they became a missing person – not the media-produced, factual missing persons identification and search information but, rather, their feelings towards and understanding and experience of their loved one. They wanted their loved one remembered as more than 'just a missing person' (Families and Friends of Missing Persons, 2016a). Young people were prepared to defend and stand up for the memory of their missing loved one. Further, their unhappiness when others outside the family assumed knowledge of the missing person, dynamics within the family or information pertaining to the missing person was evident and still raw despite the passing of time.

Remembering a loved one who had become a missing person was reinforced by the conversations that young people were sometimes a part of or overheard. Memories were reinforced by comments made to them by family members and peers. Young people were only too well aware of what they perceived as negative judgements and opinions about their missing loved one, sometimes held within the family and sometimes perpetuated by media, service providers, and the community. For loved ones who had experienced interpersonal difficulties prior to becoming a missing person, the young people and parents wanted their loved one to not just be defined by these. Megan spoke of her cousin, saying:

We want missing people to be more than just a face on a poster with a few details like time and date, and I mean I think that for Fiona that's very stark because there were six pieces of information and half of them were wrong.

So to me, that's when I first started to set out [to better inform others about the missing person] well hang on, she rode motorbikes, and she rode horses, she could fix anything she could do anything, like she loved babies, you know all that sort of stuff, she was so funny

she was the life of the party, like in her friends circle, she was everyone's friend. You know so she was so much more than the [missing persons] posters.

Young people spoke of humour, secrets, and rituals shared with their missing loved one and still practised as part of keeping the loved one's memory alive. Like many of the adults around them, young people spoke with honesty, love, affection, and exasperation, but, above all, with feelings of loyalty and gratitude for having known and had the missing person in their lives, despite the difficult times that often appeared to be the focus of the search for their loved one.

For some young people, the opportunity to connect with others who recognised the missing loved one and who acknowledged and included the young person did not present itself until many years later. Margot experienced this when she was able to meet a part of her missing father's family for the first time, several decades after he had gone missing. The ambiguity in relation to what had happened at the time of his disappearance, and in the intervening years, was acknowledged, recognised, and allowed to exist. For Margot, who had felt silenced by the different conclusions reached in terms of her father's fate – 'My mother wouldn't have allowed that. I've tried talking to her and she's not very open to that' – the act of remembering and being with others she believed loved and missed her father held great meaning and was a source of comfort. She recognised that the memories of her father that she felt had been denied and silenced were alive and present in another part of the family. Just as Belle had developed with her children an alternate, more bearable story about what had happened to her daughter and their sister, so Margot's paternal relatives had developed an alternate story about her father, their son, brother, and uncle. Margot recalled not only being allowed to talk about him but also feeling connected to her father's family.

It was the first time I met her [paternal grandmother], and that was amazing. The thing that really got me was that when I went over there, they all spoke about him all the time. They had pictures of him up in their house, and she had a painting of him, and at the dinner table they would sit there, and even the younger generation would talk about him, 'Oh, the one who's living on the desert island somewhere'. He was part of their lives and their discussions, and it really stood out for me because he hadn't been part of mine.

It was great meeting his sister. It was nice meeting people I could remember him with, and I was connected with, so I could talk about him and who were connected to his family. I wish I'd been able to do so earlier.

That meeting with family allowed Margot to welcome her own memories of her father and, in subsequent years, to share those memories with her own children. Margot also spoke about ‘celebrating’ her father’s life.

For the first time in my life with my kids I’ve started to celebrate his life, so we recognise him on his birthday and the time that he went missing. I used to go and get a loaf of hot white bread with him on Saturday mornings. That was a big treat because I wasn’t usually allowed white bread. So now my kids and I go and do that, and other little things as a celebration; and they always say, ‘Tell us more about grandpa, what else did he do?’ ... and that’s nice for me because it’s the only opportunity I’ve ever had to do it.

All of the young people had experienced changes associated with adolescence and transitions from one stage of life to another. They had observed and been aware of a range of losses, including their parents’ separations, divorces, illnesses, and death. So too had many of the parents. In some instances, the young person or a parent became the surviving next of kin, both in terms of any ongoing investigation and in holding and keeping the memory of the missing loved one present. This occurred, sadly, when older relatives and those originally identified as next of kin had died, as was Tara’s experience: ‘My parents died never knowing what happened to him.’

## **Recognising Difficulties Prior to Going Missing**

In telling their stories, young people revealed an awareness of the difficulties their missing loved one had experienced. They spoke carefully of these memories, indicating an awareness of the sometimes-negative judgements they believed others had made – and, especially, the stigma associated with mental health difficulties – in relation to their missing loved one. The interviews allowed them the opportunity to notice and reflect on those difficulties, disclosing information they admitted they had not discussed or had been careful of disclosing previously. This care related to their concern that they might cause distress to parents or siblings, and of wanting to protect others within the family. They were describing their relationship with their missing loved one, with all of its idiosyncrasies and peculiarities. The young people implied an expectation that their honest descriptions of their feelings towards their missing loved one should not be perceived as a sign of disloyalty or dislike but, rather, an understandable response to the behaviour, personality traits and the difficulties experienced and exhibited by their missing loved one. Eliza spoke of her brother’s behaviour and personality, of jumping on a train to visit her without notice: ‘I remember he did impulsive things – he was just impulsive like that.’

Some of these behaviours they had experienced directly, while others were observed or overheard being discussed. What was important to most young people was the recognition that despite their missing loved one's difficulties they were loved and missed. Josh said:

I always have a disclaimer ... you know he was actually a great dad. He was like everyone else's dad. He was always ready to do stuff and like drop anything for me and all of that sort of thing.

## **Mental Health Concerns**

Several of the young people recognised that their loved one had experienced mental health difficulties in the time before they went missing. In their attempts to understand what may have contributed to their loved one going missing, the young people realised that mental health difficulties may have been a factor, both in precipitating the event and in the longer-term outcome for their missing person. Approximately half of the missing people related to the young people and the parents in studies 1 and 2 were either known or thought to have experienced mental health difficulties. Several of the missing people had sought assistance or had come into contact with mental health providers in the months or years prior to going missing. One missing person was receiving treatment from a mental health facility at the time of his disappearance, and another had been recently treated in a mental health facility. It is important to acknowledge, however, that not all the missing people in this research had experienced mental health difficulties. Several are known or thought to be missing for reasons completely unrelated to any mental health difficulty. However, when mental health was an issue, the young people were aware that the missing person's mental health difficulties were a source of concern prior to them going missing and thought to have been a contributing factor. For every missing person, regardless of precipitating factors, the possibility of them going missing was never contemplated by those left behind.

Once a loved one was recognised to be experiencing mental health difficulties, it became a cause for concern and fear, even prior to them becoming a missing person. Young people reflected on their own and their parents' understanding of the missing loved one and the mental health difficulties several had experienced. Eliza expressed the opinion that learning about mental health should have been a part of her education:

I have dealt with some anger at why it isn't dealt with in high school. Why isn't it part of our education to learn about this stuff early? Because you're old enough as a teenager to know that stuff, and you should be trusted to know that stuff because it's really important.

Will spoke of his early awareness of his sister's difference: 'She had a bit of a mental disability, so she was often quite "out there". She didn't really think before she said stuff.' Will recognised that his age at the time of his loved one going missing impacted his family and the information they exchanged about the mental health difficulties of which they were all aware.

Not until I was older, cause often when it did get bad, we'd just go quiet about it, and I wouldn't say anything to my family because I didn't want to upset them. So, I kinda kept quiet and waited till I was a bit older, when I could understand it better, and then I would ask what it really was.

A number of young people acknowledged that they and their parents had understood very little about mental health as a medical condition or about its impact on their missing loved one, either prior to their disappearance or as a possible contributing factor to them going missing. Eliza recalled attending a university lecture where a guest speaker presented his lived experience of schizophrenia, and in that moment recognising the similarities in her brother's behaviour prior to his disappearance.

My parents didn't even understand mental health stuff, at that time. I remember after that lecture I ran out and I called my mother and I said, 'He's unwell. He might have schizophrenia. He's talking exactly the same as this guy.' I was 20; it seems crazy that my parents were 50 and we didn't know. Listening to that lecture was scary.

It clicked like a light bulb. I think she [her mother] was relieved that maybe we had some further clues about how to help him. We had some more direction about how to be around him. (Eliza)

Young people, like the adults around them, spoke of searching for answers, of wanting to ask questions of family members and service providers, just as they expressed a desire to be asked for their opinion or input. They were also acutely aware that it was often their age that led to their exclusion and their opinion not being sought. For some this caused understandably great distress and frustration.

In telling their story, young people and parents were able to reflect on what they had learned over time while expressing regret over their initial lack of knowledge and misunderstanding of their loved one's mental health difficulties. Eliza, who spoke about the 'light bulb' realisation of her brother's mental health difficulties and possible diagnosis, also acknowledged that her newly acquired knowledge about mental health heightened her own and her family's fears of the possible outcome when her brother went missing: '[S]o that when he went missing that was a very real idea, that he could have killed himself.'

Will and Zara, the younger siblings of one missing person, recalled being aware of the difficulties their sibling had experienced. Each spoke of feeling sad and guilty as they recalled her difficulties prior to becoming a missing person, and of their own discomfort with her sometimes unpredictable, ‘out there’ behaviour. Being aware of mental health difficulties contributed to the young person’s fears for their loved one’s survival when they became a missing person. For instance, Eliza recalled intrusive thoughts of what she feared might have happened to her brother: ‘It wasn’t spoken, not for those first days ... no, no. You don’t want your mind to even go there. It’s just an ongoing battle for me, that last few years.’

Like Eliza, Tara feared for her missing brother’s life, coming to the realisation that her parents and siblings did also despite each not verbalising their concerns.

I think we knew pretty much straight away that if he had taken himself off into the city, that he may not survive; that he didn’t have the life skills ... that he might become homeless. I knew pretty much straight away when mum or my grandmother said that they had formed a friendship with [a number of homelessness charities]. They were obviously thinking that he may not survive ... I knew they were concerned that he wouldn’t be able to cope; so that really caused a great deal of anxiety and worry. I remember crying myself to sleep quite a bit.

## **Young People and Insider Knowledge**

Young people recalled the emotional closeness of their relationships with their missing loved one, which at times gave them access to information and insight not necessarily shared by others. Young people believed their insider knowledge was valuable, unique, and possibly helpful. Sharing their insider knowledge of their experience became another way of feeling included, thus helping to reduce feelings of helplessness and increase feelings of connection to their missing loved one (Families & Friends of Missing Persons, 2016a, p. 1). Young people spoke about their insider knowledge of their missing loved one, sometimes gained as a sibling, as a young person of a similar age or as the child of the missing person. They reflected on conversations, interests, and secrets sometimes shared by their missing loved one. Eliza recalled her relationship with her missing brother.

The relationship I had with him was always closer. I think they [her parents] knew I knew a lot more than they did; so, they probably knew they couldn’t protect me from anything, because I’d already sort of been exposed to him over the years. I think that’s one of the difficulties siblings have – that you do know maybe more than the parents, yet you’re not spoken to. It’s not acknowledged that that relationship is often closer.

Several young people voiced strong opinions about wanting to be included in discussions and wanting to share their knowledge and insights about their missing loved one, in the belief that their insights were of value and potentially helpful in working towards a more positive outcome. Megan recalled her missing loved one's friends 'wanting to help' by sharing their insider information.

And I remember Fiona's friends who had contacted [Fiona's mother and Megan's aunt] at the time she disappeared wanting to help, and they've told me this now. They wanted to share what they knew with the police. They wanted to contribute, somehow, to being able to find her. But they had no role.

Megan reflected with some frustration on not having had this opportunity at the time her loved one went missing and not until many years later.

In my work ... we solve problems by getting into a room together and ... putting everybody's thoughts on the table ... pulling that all together and then coming up with ideas and actions. So, I didn't see why that couldn't happen. It never happened. It was why [a missing person event] came about, because I wanted everybody in the same place at the same time to have an opportunity to share what they remembered or what they knew. It might have helped uncover what happened to Fiona.

Young people not only wanted to be included in the sharing of information; they also wanted to be asked for their opinion based on the knowledge they held and their belief that they could assist in the search for their missing loved one. Debra, having spent time with her father Simon alone, was familiar with the places he had bushwalked or had gone seeking solace, because she had been there with him. Significantly, as one of the two missing people who were located deceased, Debra's father was found in a location Debra had visited with him.

Young people described feeling as though they were living 'in limbo' (Megan), of waiting as others within their family did for information and updates. They spoke of feeling dismissed when they were not included in family discussions or when information was received and not shared with them, and when assumptions were made, and conclusions reached about what had happened to their missing loved one without asking for their opinions or considering their feelings. Such speculation about their missing loved one was a cause of much distress.

### **Speculation: 'If you don't have something helpful don't say anything at all.'**

Speculation – which occurred in families, the community, and across media – compounded the difficulties young people experienced. Young people were perceptive in



recognising the discomfort others felt when answers could not be given, or solutions found. While the young people were able to recognise that it was the intention of adults to protect or reassure them, the result was that they felt unrecognised and disenfranchised when others speculated and hypothesised without actual evidence. Eliza offered a suggestion to police: ‘Don’t draw any conclusions if the family trusts you enough to tell.’

Lisa explained her experience of others attempting to reassure her, indicating that such attempts were in no way reassuring or comforting.

When I tell someone about my uncle, people always try to reassure me that he just ran away and probably has a massive, loving family of his own. That doesn’t make me feel any better. I just want them to tell me that they will always be there for me; not make up stories about what they think happened to him.

## **Being Allowed to Be Young People**

Young people described the importance of being allowed to behave like young people, to live normal lives, to be accepted for who they are and to ‘not miss out on all the other things [they are] able to do’ (Will). Young people spoke of their awareness of their families, relationships and friendships changing but, despite these changes, wanting to continue to participate in activities they had enjoyed prior to their loved one going missing. Megan recalled:

Being that age I’m not sure I really remember much about how hard it was for her [Fiona’s mother]. I don’t remember sitting around crying or anything because I was off being 15 years old with all the surfies.

While engaging in such activities was important, it did not mean they stopped thinking about and feeling distressed by their loved one’s disappearance. Young people spoke of wanting to be able to do both; that is, to remember their missing loved one and for their loved one to be remembered by others, including their friends, and also to engage in previously enjoyed day-to-day activities, which were sometimes a distraction. Megan commented:

Yeah, I was being a kid, so my friends, we always went to the movies. It was a big thing to go to the pictures and we went and saw *Dirty Dancing*. I can remember there was that scene with the log, where they’re talking, sitting out on this log in the bush. Where we grew up, there was a big storm and one of the trees fell across the creek, and Fiona and I would sit on the log just like that for hours and hours and then we’d jump off it into the creek. And I can just remember wondering if Fiona was watching *Dirty Dancing*. And now knowing what I know, that she had died before it had come out in Australia ... that she never got to watch it.

Four of the young people who participated in the research (in Group 1a) also attended the In the Loop support group meetings. Their feedback was consistently that while talking about serious issues related to their missing loved one was important; they were pleased to also be able to have ‘fun’ (Zara). In the support group meetings, they made name tags, a group sign for the door, established group rules for safety and confidentiality, and made drawings of everyday things. One of the young people brought a soccer ball and they kicked it around in the morning tea and lunchtime breaks.

They negotiated with each other and the FFMPU facilitators of the group about the nature of the feedback they were prepared to give to their parents and other family members who had travelled to the venue with them. They became the consultants for the adults about their lived experience as young people. Their feedback about what was important in the meetings ranged from writing messages to their missing loved one to recommendations about the catering for future group meetings needing to include ‘chips and gravy’. They demonstrated their capacity to enjoy the normal activities of being young people, and of being young people living with the loss of a missing loved one. Their parents actively supported them in doing so.

Some of the young people who were older at the time of interview (those in group1b) spoke of feeling judged and misunderstood for behaving like young people. For some, that was crying and being upset and, at other times, laughing, making jokes and ‘being light’ (Tara). Tara recalled her childhood, trying to understand the changes that had occurred within her family and only years later coming to understand the impact.

It feels like a lifetime that has to be unlearned; that it’s ok to be light. I’m not one of those people who goes into parties, I hate parties, and I don’t think it’s just social anxiety; it’s just a lifetime of feeling that it’s not the thing to do to be light.

Young people recalled wanting to spend time with friends and having those friends ‘naturally’ (Josh) acknowledge their missing loved one. Josh facilitated this by having photos of his missing father visible in his home. At other times, young people spoke of wanting ‘time out’ (Will). Being allowed to choose their timing in terms of talking and being alone was experienced as helpful: ‘Sometimes I don’t want to talk about it; I need to have privacy’ (Families & Friends of Missing Persons, 2016a, p. 13). Young people were aware that some of their friends did not know how to respond to them, just as their parents and other adults had experienced in their own social networks and spoke of wanting to feel connected to others.

## **Summary**

In this chapter young people spoke about how others – parents, extended family, and service providers – responded to them. Their experience of being informed about their missing loved one, learning about the police investigation, and the role of other service providers was discussed. Young people spoke about a growing awareness of how their missing loved one was understood, their memories of their loved one, the difficulties they had experienced and the knowledge they held as young people in a world where they were dependent on adults for recognition, information, and support. The next chapter will examine the experience of young people seeking and receiving support from a range of sources.

# **CHAPTER 8**

## **SUPPORTING YOUNG PEOPLE LIVING WITH AMBIGUOUS LOSS**

### **Introduction**

This chapter presents the theme of supporting young people. How, when, and from whom young people received support is addressed. Young people interacted with and observed those around them, noticing who was aware of their presence in the aftermath of their loved one going missing, who recognised the impact of their experience of trauma and loss on each of them, and who was emotionally available and psychologically present for each young person.

The support young people located and accessed changed over the time their loved one was a missing person, as the reality and challenges of living with not knowing became ‘kind of like the norm’ (Amy). Support was derived from informal and formal sources. It was sometimes accidental, unexpected and positive, and at other times absent, insufficient, and ill-informed. The factors that influenced whether and when young people accessed support are examined. Within the theme of supporting young people there are a number of threads that relate to recognising that young people need support, and where they may find support within their families and wider support network. The young people in this research also spoke about acknowledging their own resilience and finding resilience in the relationships around them. This chapter addresses and discusses each of these threads as they relate to the theme of supporting young people.

### **The Emotional and Physical Availability of Support for Young People**

Young people are affected in different ways when a loved one becomes a missing person, and those left behind grieve individually and differently, making different meaning of what has happened. Parents and other adults who lived with or interacted frequently with each young person in the time following their loved one going missing were best placed physically and psychologically to recognise their distress and respond to their support needs. Recognising the young person meant telling them their loved one was missing as soon as possible when there was concern about the loved one and responding non-judgementally to the young person’s distress as an understandable, normal reaction to a potentially devastating experience.

Young people's experiences of feeling supported, being supported, and receiving support varied considerably – for some being a positive and for others a negative experience. Parents who recognised the young person's presence were able to offer comfort and reassurance through emotional and practical support. Young people anticipated that their physical presence and the grief they were experiencing would be recognised by their family, and that the support they needed would come from within their family, with their parents 'being there for me as much as they could' (Eliza). They assumed that providing emotional support was the role of one or both parents, followed in some families by their grandparents. While none of the young people spoke about specifically asking for support from their parents, the young people who described feeling supported within their family were those where the parent was emotionally available or psychologically present. The physical presence of a parent did not, however, guarantee their psychological presence or emotional availability for their young person. Being emotionally available required the parent or another close family member to be prepared to discuss what was happening with the young person and to ask the young person what they needed emotionally in terms of support. There needed to be an acknowledgment of the ambiguity of what was happening. A number of the parents identified that they had done some or all of these things. Lisa recalled: 'I remember saying "I'm sorry, I can't make it different. All I can do is let you cry, and let you feel sad. There is no answer."' We talked a lot around that.' Several young people and parents recalled a discussion about the support needs of the young person. Sally recalled asking Debra, her daughter, about a referral for counselling, which Debra agreed to.

An awareness that there was a place where they were loved and nurtured encouraged their developing autonomy as young people, allowing them to separate and to go about their lives in the knowledge that they were able to return to a place of emotional safety. Keeping young people psychologically close did not mean that the social activities they were engaged in prior to their loved one being missing stopped or were curtailed. Encouragement from parents to connect with others and to continue previously enjoyed activities and learning opportunities, while knowing they could return to a secure emotional base, remained important developmentally and socially as they matured.

Most importantly and instrumentally, the way adults understood and lived with the ambiguity of a loved one going missing impacted the young person in their care. If, as occurred in some families, the impact on the young person, and their emotional and practical support needs, were not recognised, young people spoke of feeling alone and emotionally isolated within their family and the wider community, potentially affecting their interactions with peers

and social connections. Margot's response to the interview question about the support she received after her father became a missing person is evidence that her grief and support needs were completely overlooked.

I would summarise my answers for that as 'nobody and no one', just in terms of who supported me, where did I go and who did I talk to? ... Nobody, nowhere and no one was my experience. And the experience I guess you could summarise as lonely; that was how it felt mostly if I put it into four words ... those are the words I'd pick.

Parents were not emotionally available for a number of reasons. Their emotional unavailability may have related to their own feelings of grief and distress, which potentially impaired their insight into their children's experience of grief. Two of the young people, Tara and Margot, described feeling emotionally isolated and their grief unrecognised. Tara recalled: 'Our parents never acknowledged that we were grieving too.' Her observation of her parents' profound grief, especially her mother's, combined with her mother's concern for the mental health and wellbeing of another of Tara's siblings, likely left little emotional space for her mother to begin to acknowledge what was happening for Tara. Alternatively, if Tara's mother was able to acknowledge what was happening for her daughter, it was not evident to Tara.

As parents, usually mothers, were in most instances the one to identify the need and then refer their young person for support, it followed that if their need for support was unrecognised or overlooked then support was unavailable either from that parent or any external service providers. The responsibility for notifying other people in the young person's life and for referral to support services usually rested with parents or grandparents, often after discussion with the young person.

In the earliest days of their loved one being missing, all of the young people recalled their parent(s) offering words of reassurance in terms of a quick resolution and positive outcome: that is, of the missing person being located quickly. Some of the young people described their parents as 'amazing' (Eliza) and described parents and extended family who were supportive and quietly 'stepped up' (Amy) to support the young people within the family. Young people who were older at the time of their loved one going missing spoke of continuing to support younger family members. Amy recalled her interactions with her younger cousins whose sister Jane was missing.

I feel like I have to be there for everybody. But it's not negative, I like doing it and I'm really close with Will and Zara [younger cousins]. Not just because they're good cousins, but

because Jane's missing, I feel like I want to step up and be that older sister they really didn't get a chance to grow up with.

Several young people spoke of realising that their parent, who was physically present, was not emotionally available at a time they most needed their support in the days and months following their loved one's disappearance. Tara recalled her mother's emotional distance, seeing it as a protective mechanism.

I think she thought if she loved us the way she did before Mark disappeared that the loss would be so much greater, that if she was a bit removed, she was protected. I think it was a self-protection thing.

Tara did not recall ever being asked by her parents about how she was managing or about her support needs. It appeared to her that it was assumed that she was resilient and therefore did not require support, although she recalled being asked on a number of occasions about the welfare of another sibling. Tara surmised that her parents regarded her sibling as being less resilient than they thought Tara was. Many years later, as an adult, Tara came to her own understanding of her mother's grief and the meaning of her mother's concern for her sister. She recalled her mother's words:

'I'm sorry I made you responsible.' She didn't use these words, but she was saying 'I didn't have any time for you. I just knew you would cope.' I didn't understand at the time and I had no idea why every time I spoke to them, she would ask about my sister first, because she has never really coped. I'd ring up and she'd say 'How's [sister]?' and I had no idea until I was quite old that her concern was always something would happen to her like it had to Mark.

Four of the five young people in Group 1b were parents themselves at the time of interview – Tara, Eliza, Margot, and Megan. As did all of the parents in Study 2, they recognised the importance of being emotionally available, acknowledging their child's grief, and offering emotional support to their own children – the next generation. This next generation of young people had not been born at the time of their parents' loved ones' disappearance. For their parents, their loved one's physical absence was not forgotten, and their psychological presence was remembered and shared with the next generation. Supporting their own children and young people meant acknowledging their missing loved one and keeping them psychologically present as a part of the life of the family. Margot acknowledged that her own children were an important part of keeping the memories of her father, despite them never having known him. For all of the young people, being able to share memories of their missing

loved one was of utmost importance and a practice that brought her great comfort. Margot commented:

Probably the people I speak to most about my father are my kids, because they ask a lot of questions and they want to know about him, and what happened to him, and what was he like, and what things did he do; and so for the first time in my life, with my kids, I've started to celebrate his life, so we recognise him on his birthday and the time that he went missing.

In the time their loved one was a missing person the young people and parents spoke of other losses that had occurred in their lives. Patricia acknowledged the impact and the grief of her sister's death, made more significant because Fiona, their missing loved one, was her sister's daughter. A number of participants spoke of members of their family passing away before answers could be found and that they died, in the case of Tara's parents, 'still not knowing'.

Tara spoke of the importance she placed on being emotionally available to her own children, of being willing to talk with them, and of acknowledging her children's grief, even though her own grief had not been recognised. Tara recalled:

I know with my kids when their dad died, I was so worried about their grief. I had said to each of them, 'You have the option of not exposing yourself to all this. You can contain what you give out, or you can open yourselves wide open.' I was so proud of them.

This awareness was heightened for those whose experience at the time of their loved one going missing was of not being emotionally supported by those they expected and hoped would provide it. Their experience of their own parent being emotionally unavailable likely provided the impetus for them to be present for their own children, as Margot's word reflected: 'I couldn't bear my kids having to go through something like I went through. It was just [pause] I understood. That was very difficult.'

### **Learning about Mental Health, Grief, and Loss**

While a parent's emotional availability remained the primary factor in ensuring young people felt supported, some understanding of the developmental needs of their young person was also of importance. Health literacy in relation to mental health issues and the impact of grief and loss – including the loss of a missing person – were factors that potentially assisted parents to recognise the impact of the disappearance of their loved one on each young person, as well as enhancing the parent's insight and understanding of the young person's need for



support. However, an understanding of ambiguous loss and each young person's developmental needs was important.

Although parents and young people were not asked specific questions about their educational background and training, a number of the parents and older young people identified themselves as education or mental health professionals. In families where mental health difficulties were thought to have been a factor in their loved one's disappearance, the young people reflected on their limited understanding of mental health issues and difficulties, identifying that these limitations had existed prior to and after their loved one went missing. Several young people expressed regret and a wish to have been better-informed in their understanding of mental health issues. Young people spoke of asking and wanting to ask about their loved one's mental health and being aware of learning more as they matured; but the majority acknowledged their own, their parents' and the community's limited understanding of the topic of mental health. Eliza reflected on the moment when, studying a university subject that explained mental illness, she was more able to understand her brother's mental health difficulties.

### **Informal support**

To have these conversations, parents seek information about support services for their young person, and in the process, may access information and support for themselves. Parents often report that they do not know where to turn to access information about missingness. Information about support services was shared in the past by word of mouth, but this was only possible in communities where others had their own experience of a loved one being missing: 'The only way I found out about [FFMPU] was through a friend whose father is missing' (Donna). Parents observe that the service providers they approach, including police, are often unaware of or uninformed about support services, specifically psychosocial support services. This may be explained in part by the limited number of support agencies in the missing persons sector and the limited number of mental health professionals informed about ambiguous loss; but it may also indicate a failure to recognise that young people might need psychosocial support. Increasingly, online information and support services are becoming the medium with the greatest potential to offer wider access to families who have struggled to find any information. However, this research demonstrates a significant lack of resources specifically for young people living with missingness and highlights the need for such resources to be developed.

Most informal support came from within the young person's family, from the adults – particularly their parents – with whom they had regular contact and whom they trusted. They were physically best placed to be aware of their young person's situation and to be alert to their support needs. Apart from parents, other family members, including grandparents, cousins, and aunts, formed part of the young person's support network. Several young people described the positive impact of feeling a sense of belonging and trust in their family groups – of having a support network and of feeling supported by those closest to them. Eliza reflected on the power of the support she experienced and was able to empathise with what she believed was a difficult path for those who did not have family support.

There's nothing that you can't survive really if you have people around you. I think 'If I didn't have this family ...' And you think about people who have missing loved ones, if they were alone or they didn't like each other, or didn't offer support it would be fucking hard. I would want to support them because I feel I've got the resources to and I guess that's what dad feels too; and I guess that's why he keeps staying involved with FFMPU. It's not just part of his way of coping, which it definitely is. It's also because he's very aware that he's in a good situation to help others.

Young people require the assistance and support of the adults around them to facilitate communication between them and others within their networks. While most parents do not immediately consider their own support needs, the majority very quickly recognise the need to provide support and information for their young person, despite describing feeling ill-equipped and at times not knowing how to begin to have such difficult conversations and how to support their young person.

For many of the young people, these familial relationships continued and were complemented, for some later in life, by other relationships with friends, intimate partners, and spouses. In some families, the young people experienced relationship losses through breakdown in the relationships of others close to them or in the breakdown of their own relationships. Three of the young people experienced the end of intimate long-term relationships. Several experienced the death of significant family members.

Young people spoke about their parent and other adults 'checking in' (Megan) and being emotionally available. This often occurred in a low-key manner, transpiring as part of day-to-day life – 'we were just always around the table together' (Megan). Megan's mother, Patricia, spoke more fully about the day-to-day sharing of information and support and the automatic inclusion of the young people in family gatherings and conversations about their missing loved one. Patricia recalled 'a network of women supporting each other', describing it as 'very

closed, and I think we closed it ourselves. We never asked for outside help.’ She recalled ‘nonsense and laughter’, and young people being present. Patricia recalled:

They were there. Megan, definitely, because we all just sat around the table at my sister’s. We’d be having cups of tea, talking about Fiona; They were all involved. We’d have all been talking, so I didn’t consciously include them, but we were all always around that table. We never had the men there. They were out working and socialising.

For most young people living with both parents, while their mother remained the primary source of information and support, male family members were equally but sometimes less actively or overtly supportive. One such example occurred in Lisa’s family. While Lisa’s mother, Linda, was the parent who often initiated conversations and suggested rituals for remembering their missing loved one, David, Lisa’s father, Ryan, was more quietly supportive. Linda described Ryan as ‘just too traumatised ... for quite a while’. This may possibly have been because the missing person, David, was Ryan’s brother and, as such, Ryan may have been more significantly impacted by the loss. Ryan, however, supported Lisa’s inclusion in family activities that acknowledged his brother and her participation in *In the Loop*. Ryan’s interest in this research and his continued support for Lisa was evidenced by his request to participate in Study 2. In Debra’s family, her mother, Sally, identified her husband, Nick, who is Debra’s stepfather, as supportive both of Debra and herself: ‘Most things to do with the time Simon was missing, I generally would just tell Debra, except for one really difficult time and then Nick was with me.’

When young people were referred for support outside their family, or told someone that their loved one was missing, they did so with an expectation that there would be people who ‘got it’. Outside of their immediate families they found peers – within their social or school group – some of whom appeared able, and others unable, to offer emotional support and understanding. Zara described varying responses from friends, sometimes experienced as supportive and at other times unsupportive. She spoke of wanting friends to be empathic, and able to acknowledge her loss.

I don’t tell many people, and some have just stood there and not said anything, not knowing what to say. I guess it’s hard for people to respond, but it’s ok for them to say, ‘That’s really sad’ and empathise.

Zara’s brother Will said he wanted friends to be able to say, ‘I’m here for you’.

Young people placed considerable importance on being able to trust others with personal and sensitive information and of wanting to be able to exercise some control over who was told

and when others were told about their missing loved one. Lisa recalled that ‘everyone in [her] class in high school knew’ as a result of media coverage, while Zara’s friends watched Belle, Zara’s mother, interviewed. She commented: ‘It was cool that they saw her on TV but not what it was about [her missing sister].’

## **Use of Media and Internet**

At the time of their loved one going missing, none of the young people identified the media or internet, including social media, as an avenue for accessing support specific to living with the loss of a missing loved one. They did, however, access social media to maintain contact with friends and sometimes family. This applied to the younger research participants, given the advent of the internet and social media had not occurred for those whose loved one had been missing for a longer time. Debra commented that ‘[she] would not “like” it’ – referring to the FFMPU Facebook page, a page dedicated to raising awareness and offering an avenue of support for families. Her reason for this was that others, including her friends, would then see that she had liked the page and possibly ask her why, if they were not already aware that her father was a missing person. This potentially afforded her more control over who and when others became aware that her father was missing – one of the limited avenues available for young people to limit how information was disseminated.

Parents, however, did follow and, at times, comment via social media. They also accessed information online in relation to missing persons’ information and events. Young people and parents had observed that the capacity to control the speed with which personal information was disseminated via the internet and other media was limited. As Debra had first learned via social media that her father was a missing person, her experience of not being able to control the information publicly available may have contributed to her reticence. Nell’s experience, as a parent, is further evidence of how quickly information could be disseminated via media, with little control for the family. Nell recalled sitting down to inform her niece and nephew that their grandfather was missing: ‘So, I pulled them aside and said, “Kids, I’ve got something I have to tell you”. And they piped up and said, “We already know; we heard it on the radio”.’

## **Support from Friends**

‘Long-term friends’ were described as important ‘sounding boards’ (Tara). Young people quickly learned and intuitively knew which friends were and were not available to them. Several young people were aware of friends who had experienced bereavements in their own lives, including the death of a loved one. In these instances, young people expressed the belief

that their friend's loss meant that their friend was more likely to be able to understand a little of their own experience of their missing loved one. For others, the loss the friend had experienced appeared to limit their capacity to be emotionally present and offer support. Both Lisa and Tara described friends who responded quite differently.

My best friend's uncle had died, and I had a friend whose brother had died. There were lots of people who had had [someone die]. I talked about Uncle David. One was like super hugging me all the time, and she was really supportive; and other friends said things like, 'Well, he's not dead'. (Lisa)

Tara's experience of her two friends at school is indicative of her intuition and compassion for her peers despite the grief of her brother's loss and the difficulties she was experiencing in her family.

My two best friends. One of them, I discovered not till after we were at school that her father had committed suicide. So, I sort of knew without asking that there was something there. We are still good friends and I didn't know why, but I just couldn't put a layer of grief. There was already something raw. You just innately know that sometimes. Not that she didn't want to, but I just felt I couldn't. My other friend, classic pragmatist. I did try to say something, and she said 'Oh well, that's life isn't it, you just have to ...' Not much point in going further.

Some young people naturally experienced friendships that changed throughout their adolescence. Some friendships waned over time and only years later were re-established or reconnected. Margot described such an experience.

I remember seeing a girl [at the memorial service for her father] from school; the one whose father had died. She came, which was amazing because that was difficult for her. We were great friends but surprisingly we didn't talk about it. We didn't have a lot of contact after we left school but since I've had kids, we are in contact now.

## **School Support**

The young people did not identify the school they attended as a source of support or information. None of them spoke about receiving acknowledgement or emotional support from teachers or counsellors despite knowing that staff were aware of their loved one's disappearance, although some parents identified the response of the school to their young person, on being informed of the young person's loss, as supportive. One parent, who had proactively contacted her son's school, described his experience of the support as positive, even though he did not mention it.

Young people expected and relied on their parents to make contact with and inform their school about their missing loved one, and most, but not all, parents did contact the school to advise of the student's loss. None of the young people interviewed spoke of telling their teachers themselves. Margot spoke of her teachers being unaware of her father's disappearance and the distress she felt. She described hiding her distress from others, including at school, because she had deduced from her interactions with her mother and her mother's friends that that was what she was supposed to do. She had been instructed in the two weeks following her father's disappearance to 'get on with [her] life' and not be 'miserable'. It is likely that if Margot's school had been made aware of her father's disappearance and her grief response recognised and accepted as a normal response, she may have felt less ashamed and less compelled to hide her distress, which was nothing more than a normal reaction to such a loss. She recalled: 'Nobody at school knew. My mother didn't tell anyone at school. I never had counselling. None of the teachers spoke to me; there was nothing like that.'

When support was not available in the young person's home, this did not appear to increase the likelihood of the young person alerting a teacher or school counsellor, although a number of the young people spoke of telling one or two friends. For some, being able to have friends at school was comforting, while for others the response felt dismissive – 'they said "They've probably just moved to America with their family"' (Lisa). Some experienced the response as minimising: 'She's only missing, worse things have happened in my life' (Families & Friends of Missing Persons, 2016a). Margot recalled: 'I eventually told one other girl whose father had died, and she got really upset when I told her, so I didn't speak to her about it again.'

Young people spoke of wanting to feel they had some control over how information about their missing loved one and their own situation was shared. Zara recalled: 'Really I just talk to my mum. I don't like going to my schoolteachers; they would just take it too far.' Margot, for whom support at home was limited, also recalled that no one outside her immediate family – including 'no one at school' – was aware that her father was a missing person. Margot recalled being distressed and feeling the need to hide her distress from her teachers and peers. Margot's only comment about the first year following her father's disappearance was: 'I was in first year high school. I failed agriculture.'

In the three families where the missing person was the young person's father, two of the young people's mothers contacted their school. In one of these families the parent making contact, Nell, received a positive and supportive response when contact was made. She recalled:

I had made contact and kept them in the loop. I told Josh; so, I contacted the primary school. He had a good connection with the teacher he'd had in Year 6; and the principal of course. The principal actually contacted the headmaster in the senior school for me, to let him know.

Nell went on to describe her son's first day in secondary school, saying: 'It was really good, the first day at [secondary] school, one of the Year 6 teachers offered to walk across with him.'

At times young people observed a lack of understanding of anything related to missing people, especially in relation to even a basic understanding of ambiguous loss and its impact on young people. A number of young people noted that their school, although aware that the young person's loved one was missing, did not acknowledge the loss. The schools did not inquire about their support needs or appear to be mindful of triggers that might have heightened the student's distress when support was lacking or when interactions at school with teachers or students caused them distress. Tara described teacher and peer interactions as 'cruel' and was able to clearly recall her distress many years later.

I remember crying myself to sleep quite a bit [in the boarding house]. No one asked. Those places are just abusive, oh my God, emotionally abusive. So no, no one asked. None of them ever said 'Are you doing okay? Would you like to speak to anybody?'

None of the young people spoke of wanting to avoid talking about their missing loved one – in fact, they wanted permission to talk, to remember, and to acknowledge what had happened; however, they were mindful of the need for sensitivity when discussing difficult information. An understanding of the impact of trauma, grief, and loss in the lives of young people may have led to a more compassionate and trauma-informed approach to sensitive and disturbing material. Lisa described a topic for discussion that disturbed and upset her and a number of other students. She observed:

We had the most stupid, stupid assignment. It was like, 'You have to write about the worst thing that's ever happened to you'; so, half the class had breakdowns because of it, and the teacher was traumatised because everyone was really upset. I was really upset. After that it was 'Let's take this off the syllabus'.

## **Formal Support**

As would be expected because of their age, young people did not initiate support-seeking outside of their immediate family at the outset of their loved one being missing. The exception occurred when parents or grandparents became aware of the young person's need for professional support and became advocates on their behalf, initiating inquiries and referrals.

Some of the parents, and young people via their parents, accessed professional counselling services in relation to difficulties arising as a result of their loved one being missing. While their concerns might have been loosely described as related to the impact on their mental health and wellbeing, the difficulties both young people and adults experienced arose from the traumatic, challenging, and ongoing nature of living with not knowing. The predominant presenting difficulty related to feelings of being overwhelmed and anxious as a result of a loss that remained ambiguous; such was Lisa's experience when her parents accessed professional help for her in relation to her experience of anxiety. Neither parents nor young people participating in this research identified significant pre-existing mental health concerns for any of their young people. All acknowledged that the difficulties the young person was experiencing directly related to having a missing loved one. Debra's mother, Sally, recalled: 'I just tried to make sure she could have some counselling at headspace and FFMPU. It was her choice to do as much as she wanted.'

A number of parents spoke of their efforts and the challenge of finding suitable counselling or psychological support for their young person. The challenge related to finding someone the parent and the young person perceived had the training, knowledge, and expertise to understand their situation and the dynamics of ambiguous loss. While the mothers of both Sally and Nell recognised that it was ultimately their young person's decision to engage in counselling support, both spoke of wanting to know what was available and accessible. Nell described the process of finding a mental health professional for her son, Josh, to talk to, recognising that she needed to facilitate the meeting and be reassured that the professional was 'right' and that her son had to 'click' with him.

The first one I didn't think was right at all. Josh didn't really want to go back, and I said, 'I'm not forcing you to, but it might be a good idea just to have someone to talk to'. Anyway, I found this guy, through a friend who said, 'Try him, he's a really lovely bloke'. So, I went along, met him, and he said, 'You know anything that Josh discusses with me is confidential'. And I said totally understand that. So, then Josh went and saw him and said, 'Matt's fantastic'.

Nell described the counselling her son, Josh, accessed with her help as a 'release' and an opportunity to express a range of emotions, to talk 'about [his] dad', and any other topic he chose. She observed that her son gained strategies for expressing emotion, and said:

Some days they talk about Dad and other days they just play pool or go outside and play basketball, hoops and just talk about anything really. It was a release for him. And one of the



things he told him was, because there was a lot of anger, he said ‘If you get really cranky just kick your soccer ball against the wall in your bedroom’. And I never knew that. Anyway, this one night I hear this ‘bang, bang, bang’, he said, ‘Oh Matt told me when I’m cranky, instead of taking it out on anyone else or to release my anger, just kick the ball’. And most of the time he’d tell me what Matt and he talked about anyway. I certainly didn’t ask but he’d tell me.

Eliza recalled her counselling experience as one in which she felt the counsellor ‘needed to tick the boxes’ and failed to understand both the ambiguity and the impact of her loved one going missing, instead seeming to take on an investigative role by asking her many questions. She described her experience: ‘He challenged me in a way that I was like flabbergasted, on something to do with Dad, and I got really pissed off to be honest.’

For those young people who did access professional support, finding the right fit between the needs of the young person and the approach of the mental health professional were essential in allowing the young person to feel heard, understood, and to regain a sense of control about who was privy to their deeply personal information. One of the most important factors in accessing support was that the young person’s experience of being able to ‘relate’ (Josh) to the mental health professional and believing that the mental health professional ‘got it’ (Debra and Will). A mental health professional who understood the dynamics of ambiguous loss and its ongoing unresolved nature was identified as essential, while confidentiality, trust, and a sense of control, if not present, meant the young person did not engage with the mental health professional.

The availability and access to group support for young people is limited, with the only support group, In the Loop, in NSW. Unfortunately, similar services do not exist in any other Australian state or territory. Four of the five young people in Group 1a in Study 1 attended the In the Loop support group meeting. Each was referred by their parent only after the parent had the opportunity to meet the two facilitators and have their questions answered. The parents needed to be able to trust that attending a support group would not exacerbate the distress their young person was experiencing.

A number of young people, initially at least, expressed reluctance to speak in a public arena or in front of others, including young people, about their experience of having a missing loved one. All of the young people who attended In the Loop identified feelings of anxiety in relation to attending the first support group meeting, meeting others they had not previously met and discussing a topic as difficult and emotional as their experience of living with the loss of a missing loved one. Sally, Debra’s mother recalled the hesitance Debra had felt attending

the first group meeting and her attempts to reassure her: ‘Debra was nervous. I said, “Just see how it is. If you don’t like it, you don’t have to keep going”.’

All of the young people who attended the In the Loop support group meeting described it as a positive experience that helped them feel less isolated, to articulate other feelings and emotions, and to identify strategies for living with not knowing. Zara commented: ‘In the Loop was good because it taught me how to cope with that sort of thing.’ Several young people who attended the group provided feedback and expressed surprise that parts of the group had been ‘fun’.

### **Finding Resilience**

Despite the ongoing impact of their grief, all of the young people were interacting in a range of different arenas and responding to and coping with the many changes and demands of adolescence. Continuing to engage in previously enjoyed activities and social situations while responding to and dealing with the reactions of others towards them was challenging and often yet another cause for anxiety. Despite this, and the ongoing impact of their grief, all of the young people continued to make their way through their adolescence and, for the older ones, into adulthood and parenthood. Dealing with service providers and negotiating the complex system associated with having a missing loved one was further cause for anxiety; and yet they did. Young people who had avoided social media later actively engaged in missing persons events, speaking publicly about their experience. Others raised awareness, writing in print media and sharing their stories in the hope that they might assist others to navigate a similar path with less difficulty. Carol reflected on her experience and that of her children.

We’re pretty resilient. I know that we can deal with things. I still talk about it, but I get on and move on. I never moved on from the fact that Dad’s not in my life, but I certainly got on with my life, and I think my children were brought up in a world where we just got on with our lives, in a relatively normal way. So, I think that’s how we all moved on by just doing the things we’d always done.

Accessing support services and approaching service providers was potentially anxiety-provoking. A positive, non-judgemental, and non-prescriptive response from service providers, in terms of how to live with not knowing, was essential. This assisted young people to engage with services. Service providers with an understanding of the dynamics of ambiguous loss were better able to accommodate differences in the way those left behind dealt with their loss, sometimes even within the same family. For Margot, who had felt silenced within her family,

accessing formal support and increasing her own understanding through psychoeducation was an experience she described as ‘powerful’ and ‘a relief’. Margot explained:

I read *Ambiguous Loss* by Pauline Boss, which was excellent because of the simple thing that you don’t have to know. It’s ok to think there’s a 99.99% chance that my father is dead, and I’ll never see him again; but it’s ok to think ‘I don’t know that for sure’. It’s funny how something so simple can be such a relief, just to know – it’s ok not to know ... That was really powerful for me because before I was thinking, ‘I have to convince myself that he’s dead. I have to somehow do that’, and I couldn’t, because I don’t.

Several of the young people had experienced other bereavements and losses prior to and during the time their loved one was missing, as Josh had. Nell acknowledged his experience of loss.

His father went missing in the January and my mum passed away in the October, and that hit him really hard. But then the following May my brother died unexpectedly as well. So, for me it was hard but for this kid [Josh] he’d lost these major people in his life.

Despite these losses, Josh continued with and completed his schooling, continued to engage in associated activities and established a support network for other young people in his local community. Every parent expressed admiration for their young person in terms of how they had coped, the strategies they had used and the resilience they demonstrated in their capacity to care for others despite their own losses. Nell went on to speak about her son, Josh.

Anyway, I’m watching them walk off, and Josh has his arm around his [niece]. Not that she was upset but he was supporting her, and I thought, ‘Yeah, he’s amazing; he’s looking after her’. For a child of his age, that had suffered so much loss in such a short time like he did, and to be able to deal with things the way he did and to be there for others.

Sally spoke of her daughter Debra’s ‘great empathy’ and her capacity to deal with a range of stresses and demands on top of the loss of her father. She described her daughter in the following way.

Debra is able to compartmentalise very well. She would know the information, park it and then was able to carry on quite normally. Every now and then something got to her, a busy day, stress, the girls at school, and it would all just flood out. She would have a really big cry and we would lie together wracked with sadness – this cathartic release of tears and emotion and would feel all right. She was an amazingly resilient girl; she would just go ‘ok’, quite pragmatic. I learnt so much from Debra.

Many young people spoke of gaining insights about themselves and others within their family. Young people spoke about their belief that while they had lived through the most profound loss of their lives, they had also learned about their ability to ‘bounce back’ (Zara) and their capacity for compassion for others. Will expressed the belief that his empathy and understanding had grown out of his sister’s disappearance. Will reflected:

I still went through a lot of the emotions, I understood them all and I sort of dealt with it a bit quicker than a lot of the others, but it just kind of helped me understand what others were going through; and it helped me deal with other problems as well. The understanding I got from this issue was pretty deep and helps me out a lot dealing with not only the family, but all the other problems at my age.

Eliza spoke of finding ways to cope and ‘ground’ herself, and how her understanding of what was reality was challenged by her brother being a missing person. She reflected:

I was thinking, ‘How do I just cope on a daily basis?’ Who do I talk to?’ I’m quite a spiritual-minded person and it really interrupted my relationship with the spirit world. That really affected me because that had made me feel whole and suddenly, I didn’t feel whole. Not only was something missing in the form of my brother, but it was my trust, my trust in fate and understanding outside of what’s going on in this reality. It really blurred it for me. I had to really consciously ground myself all the time.

Several young people spoke about developing a deeper understanding of and closer relationships with a parent, siblings, and other children through their shared experience and understanding. Tara spoke of developing a close relationship with her father after her brother went missing. She recalled:

Dad and I were very close. I think I was the only one that he told [about sensitive information relating to her brother’s disappearance]. So, he told me things like that which were sort of incongruous with the fact that he didn’t really share a lot of the day-to-day stuff. I guess he had to unburden to someone, and he did say not to tell Mum, that Mum wouldn’t cope.

While the young people recalled the difficulties and distress they experienced following their loved one’s disappearance, they did not question the legitimacy or the intensity of their feelings or the cogency of their grief, describing their responses in a matter-of-fact way that suggested they believed their responses to be reasonable, justified and, above all, normal, given the profound nature of their loss. Nor did the young people verbalise questions in relation to the high levels of distress and the intense grief they observed in those around them. While they were at times concerned and upset for their parents and at witnessing their parent’s distress,

they accepted that distress in the same way they did their own – it was justified and normal because they, too, were profoundly affected.

All of the young people recalled witnessing family members' distress, even though a number of parents spoke specifically of managing their emotion and trying to limit the depth of what their children observed. Belle recalled: 'They've seen me cry a few times, but no more than that really. I think they can be exposed to bits and pieces of that, but not really to see the depth of the pain.'

Tara spoke of witnessing her mother's strong reaction to sighting a male she believed was her missing son, Tara's brother. While Tara did not overtly question her mother's response, she was able to clearly recall, decades later, the traumatic impact on her family and herself.

I remember one time, driving, Mum thought she saw Mark. She was screaming at my Dad to get across to the other side. All had been calm. By the time Dad got to turn she couldn't see this person anymore and she was hitting him and screaming at him. I thought it doesn't matter what he does, it will never be enough. I was 14, we were all sitting in the back. I think my brother was really stressed. He was in the middle and my sister and I were on either side. We were probably all just crying, sitting there silently, thinking 'Oh my God'.

What impacted each young person most profoundly was the amount of recognition they received from those around them, especially those they were closest to relationally – their parents and grandparents. Their feelings of grief and loss were deepened by the loss of emotional connection and support from parents they hoped and expected were available to comfort them. Margot's words reflect her experience of not being recognised for her need for support as a young person whose loved one was missing or for the grief she carried silently for many years. She recalled a conversation, as an adult, with her mother.

I asked my mother 'Why didn't you help me?' And she said quite clearly, 'It never occurred to me that I should'. She said she had her friends in church supporting her and she said, 'It's not that I thought that I should, and I didn't do it, it just never occurred to me that I needed to do those things for you'. So that was her very honest answer. I mean I was shocked by it and that was her honest answer. It never occurred to her that we [Margot and her brother] needed it; so yeah, that was that.

Despite her loneliness and the difficult periods throughout her adolescence and her adult life, Margot continued at school and then university, marrying, having children, and establishing herself as a health professional. She recalled a recent conversation:

I met recently with a counsellor after I got out of hospital, and she said something along the lines of ‘You did what you needed to do to survive at the time, because you didn’t have any guidelines or any adult support. You didn’t have another way that you knew to approach the situation, so that was what you chose. Now you obviously need to develop new methods of coping.’

Margot had been developing ‘new methods of coping’. She travelled overseas to meet her missing father’s family for the first time, decades after her father became a missing person. She recalled making the difficult decision to leave one of her children in the care of her child’s father because of the urgency of making the trip. She reported that first meeting with her paternal grandmother as a powerful and positive experience of finding connection and comfort. Margot continued to practise what she observed in their practice of remembering their son and her father. She established rituals and remembrances that she continued to enjoy with her own children – evidence of her resilience and her determination to keep his memory alive while he remained physically absent. Like Margot, other young people responded similarly in remembering and acknowledging their missing loved one; Debra, enjoying music and playing the guitar as her father had done, and Lisa, writing to her uncle on his birthday and telling him about significant milestones in her life, are two examples.

### **Support for Parents**

A number of parents identified that they needed support themselves, understandably, to cope with the loss of their missing loved one, and to enable them to support, and advocate for the young people in their care. They sought support from other family members, friends, and professionals and, as occurred with the young people, support was accessed informally and through more formal channels. Some parents, like a small number of young people, looked within themselves to find ways of coping with their emotions and all that was happening around them. Locating the limited support services was as challenging for parents as it had been for parents seeking support for their young people.

The contact the family members of missing people had with police was a significant determinant of their need for support being identified and, if identified, potentially being made aware of support services. Parents did not recall the service providers, including police, with whom they had contact asking them about their need for support. If parents or other family members did ask about options for support beyond the police investigation, it appeared that

service providers were not aware of agencies that might offer practical or emotional support to families. One parent, Donna, reflected on this realisation.

You have to find your own way through it. The police don't tell you. They don't even know FFMPU exists. The only way I found out about FFMPU was through a friend whose father is missing.

Donna spoke of her strategies for coping at a time when she was unaware of external support services, recalling the steps she took to make sense of what was happening, and to find 'peace'.

Something just in my head said, 'Pull it together; you're going to get through this. You're going to get on the other side'. I've always gone down the beach since. You can find peace and sit there and make sense of the world and sense of it all and try to come to terms with it.

In terms of informal support, Nell recalled asking a friend for support when she reached a point of feeling very much alone. She described trying to manage a range of day-to-day demands, working full-time, supporting her son, and being a single parent.

I had to try and contain what I was feeling to be strong for him. I can remember one night; he was being a typical kid. Obviously, my nerves were a bit frayed. In the end I rang my girlfriend and I said, 'I have to get out'. I had no one else here to talk to. I couldn't say to my husband or partner, you look after Josh, I've got to get out. I can't deal with this. But this particular night I knew I had to. My friend came over and continued to cook dinner and I got in the car and I went, and I just drove for an hour-and-a-half or something. I knew I was just at a point where if I didn't get a break I was going to crack.

All of the parents spoke honestly about their need for support and identified their awareness of the need to be emotionally available and able to support their young people, while at times not knowing how to do this. Like Nell (above), all of the parents interviewed acknowledged the strain of living with not knowing and the resultant feelings of grief. They recalled feeling powerless to make a difference to their young person's suffering. In an interview with the researcher where her daughter Lisa was present, Linda recalled her feelings.

I remember saying 'Sorry, I can't make it different. All I can do is let you cry, and let you feel sad. There is no answer.' We talked a lot around that. I used to feel so bad that I couldn't make it better; I couldn't bring him back for you. I think that's the issue that adults have with kids. We can't answer their questions. Not being able to say, 'It's ok'. Instead saying, 'We're all sad; there's nothing we can do.'

Parents who sought information in the form of reading material about ambiguous loss, shared information with others, located informal support networks or reached out to mental health professionals spoke of developing a better understanding of ambiguous loss, feeling better able to live with not knowing and more equipped to support their young person. Others, like Sally, sought professional support for themselves at the same time as they were exploring support options for their young people: ‘I saw a counsellor, and I just tried to make sure she [Debra] could have some counselling at headspace or FFMPU.’

Most of the mothers of the young people spoke of deriving support from male and female relatives and friends, work colleagues and, sometimes, their adult children. Sally described her husband, Nick, as a ‘great support [and] a good sounding board’. She recalled her mother’s ‘good relationship with Simon’ and ‘friends and colleagues at work [who] were so, so supportive’. Finding this network of support led her to comment: ‘I never had a thought that I couldn’t talk to anyone about this.’

Parents also accessed online support through a range of social media sites. They accessed these sites for news updates about missing persons events, the scheduling of support group meetings and information about developments and research in the missing persons sector. A number of social media pages also provided information about research and current knowledge, forming an online community that enabled people to access sites as they chose and in their own time. Of the parents participating in the research, all had attended one or more missing persons events or gatherings organised by FFMPU and state or federal police – another opportunity to access informal support, to meet service providers, and other family members.

More formally, a number of the parents who participated in the research had attended support group meetings facilitated by the FFMPU. Parents and other family members chose the location and the frequency with which they attended meetings, which were held in a number of regional and metropolitan areas bimonthly. All but one parent had attended one or more support group meetings, while Sally recalled attending ‘about three or four groups’. In doing so, those who attended connected with other families who had also experienced the loss of a missing loved one. They recalled feeling less isolated and were able to share strategies for coping with ambiguous loss and other information (Families & Friends of Missing Persons, 2016b). Sally commented about attending the support group meetings:

It was a space where you could sit and not say anything if you didn’t want to. My students [in a tertiary institution] say you’re in a room of people, where everyone’s case, situation, story is so different, but everyone knows the same thing about ambiguity, about living with not knowing, because people [in the group meetings] ‘get it’. We still say that.



The ability to locate support services was a vital factor for young people, and parents played an important advocacy role. As acknowledged previously, limited support services for the families of missing people were established in the late 1990s and early 2000s. This meant that for the young people and parents whose loved one was a more recently missing person, there was the possibility of accessing support services, albeit limited, that had not been available earlier.

## **Summary**

This chapter presented the voices of the participants from the data collected in the semi-structured interviews in Studies 1 and 2 as they described their experiences of the support they received when their loved one went missing. The various types of support young people were offered was explicated, while recognising that young people being able to access support was dependent on their need for support actually being recognised – which, in turn, was dependent on the emotional availability of the adults around the young people, most notably their parents. The young people from Study 1 and the parents from Study 2 identified support that was derived from a number of different sources, delivered in different ways, and at different times throughout the young person's experience of their loved one being missing. The following chapter presents the systemic response to service delivery and support for young people.

# **CHAPTER 9**

## **THE ROLE OF SERVICE PROVIDERS**

### **Introduction**

As this research has demonstrated, service providers play an important role in responding to and supporting young people and their families when a loved one is missing. The loss of a missing loved one disrupts many aspects of the lives of young people, especially with regard to family relationships, friendships, and worldview. Importantly, how those within the young person's network respond to them has far-reaching consequences. This chapter brings together the findings from the Qualtrics survey questionnaire (see Appendix 4) from Study 3, which sought responses from service providers about their awareness and understanding of the experience and support needs of young people with a missing loved one. Respondents were those who identified as having contact with or providing support to young people or families affected by the loss of a missing loved one. The responses from the various systems and the service providers within them are discussed, starting with the need for young people to have a secure base that provides a sense of safety and enables them to access support in a way that meets their needs at a time of their choosing.

### **A Secure Base**

Young people and parents find themselves having to negotiate complex and unfamiliar systems and processes, unprepared for the emotional and practical challenges missingness presents. The challenges they face are beyond what they could ever envisage. Service providers are a part of the system and can promote a secure base for young people, ensuring they feel supported and equipped to deal with the challenges they face. Feeling included and supported by those closest to them relationally positively affects a young person's emotional well-being and the way they live with not knowing both in the short and long term. The opportunity to be physically close to parents, caregivers, and supportive people is important; however, feeling psychologically close and included are the most significant factors in how young people cope with all that follows when their loved one goes missing. Young people require the continuing presence of a secure base of immediate family members and caregivers, ideally connecting to a network of extended family, friends and, when required, community members and service providers. The grief the young person feels as a result of their loved one's disappearance

remains, but the ripple effect or reverberations in every aspect of their lives are lessened with the support of psychologically present people.

Service providers working in youth and out-of-home care services identified situations where the young people were sometimes physically alone or disconnected from other family members. While the reasons for this disconnection were not asked for or given, what was evident was that if a young person was in crisis accommodation or out-of-home care, there had been a disruption or breakdown in the family unit. This dynamic of being alone arose also for some of the young participants in the research, despite living with family members. For young people, whether living with or apart from family, identifying adults, including service providers, who understood the ambiguity of their experience, and who were prepared and equipped to engage with the young person, was sometimes difficult.

### **In Their Own Time**

Young people have a fundamental need to exercise autonomy, even when living with trauma and loss (Graves & Larkin, 2006; Murphy et al., 2008; Spear & Kulbok, 2004). The young people who participated in the research clearly indicated that a secure base facilitated their efforts to venture out into the world and demonstrate this in the way they are able to engage with others outside of their families. Living with the loss of a missing person challenges a young person's belief in the world as a safe and mostly predictable place. When young people find themselves in a situation where they feel unable to exercise control, they want to be able to exercise control whenever possible. This extends to having some control over who comes into their lives after their loved one goes missing and how, and with whom, they share information about both their missing loved one and their own experience. Young people want to choose the type of support they access to meet their individual needs. Importantly, young people want to talk in their own time, determining when and to whom they tell their story. They are mindful of their own privacy and feel protective of their families, their missing loved one, and their relationships with each other. In particular, young people want to be in a position of being asked and of giving permission before their personal details and those of their missing loved one are revealed. So, while the opportunity to share personal experiences and their own learning with others is important, the decision about when and how this is done is a very individual one.

Inclusion of young people needs to be respectful rather than intrusive. This research has shown how young people are willing to work with others and to share their knowledge in the

hope of supporting others left behind. The manner in which service providers and the media approach young people and their families influences their willingness to share their story. While young people do not want to be ignored or invisible, neither do they want to be regarded as a curiosity. When the young person's quest for autonomy is recognised, if they are well-informed, given access to truthful, age-appropriate information and are supported to make decisions for themselves about how their stories are shared, they feel respected and empowered. The following brief synopsis illustrates these points.

Debra, who was introduced in Chapter 5, accessed support from a number of different sources, including individual counselling from a number of agencies within and outside the missing persons sector. Debra's family started from a position of asking her about her support needs, ensuring she understood what was available and that she was aware of the referral being made. Debra also attended In the Loop, the FFMPU support group meeting for young people, a number of missing persons events and two FFMPU Family Forums. At a Family Forum roundtable discussion (Davies, 2012), Debra shared her opinion about how to include young people with family members and service providers. At these events and meetings, Debra also interacted with a member of the legal community – a coronial professional – and two journalists. Debra spoke with the journalists about her experience of reaching out to other young people and being involved in helping to 'set up a support group called In the Loop ... Facilitated by FFMPU, the new group will do just what its name suggests'. She was quoted saying: 'We want to get the message out there that it's okay for kids to know; it's important for kids to be in the loop' (Mardon, 2012).

In the early days of her father being a missing person, Debra spoke to very few people outside her immediate family about her father. Debra was supported by the adults around her and was encouraged to express her needs as she felt comfortable, within her family, her school community, and the missing persons community. While she did not pursue media attention, she made the informed decision after discussion with her family to speak about her lived experience.

## **The Systemic Response**

This research is set within a number of systems, each interlinked. Support and recognition in one system have a ripple effect in the others, as evidenced when young people observed their parents' distress following interactions with a range of service providers. Perceiving their trauma as being overlooked or dismissed by service providers, at any level,

flowed onto others within their families, causing further distress. Support and recognition from service providers helped to reduce, or at least did not exacerbate, feelings of distress within families about a range of aspects related to their loved one being missing. Pollock (1989) acknowledges the importance of recognising that each person within the family system relates to the other and that the attention accorded to the needs of others can have lifelong effects. Likewise, young people and their families interact in different systems, with the potential for the nature of the response from these systems to have lifelong impacts (Lehrner & Yehuda, 2018). Recognition and support, when it is available and provided in one system, affects the young person's interaction within the other systems and, as the research has shown, intergenerationally (Lehrner & Yehuda, 2018; O'Neill, Fraser, Kitchenham & McDonald, 2018). Thus, the implications of the nature and quality of the response at every level can significantly impact the functioning of young people.

### **A Limited Societal Response**

In Australia, in 2020, there needs to be greater recognition of every aspect of the missing persons phenomenon at a societal and political level. Missingness requires more attention than the limited statistical information and profiling of missing people currently available in the public domain. Statistical reporting tends to focus on the high number of people reported missing annually in Australia. At this level, reporting is inconsistent and sporadic. Only two nationally funded studies have been released in Australia almost two decades (Bricknell, 2017; James, Anderson, & Putt, 2008). The statement that most often follows the statistic that highlights the number of people reported missing each year relates to the percentage of missing people who return or are located (AFP, 2017). While reporting on successful outcomes is important and newsworthy, this discounts those who remain missing and abrogates the reality and experience of those left behind.

The media at this level has an influential role to play in focusing on all aspects of missingness, including long-term missing persons issues, the families left behind and the economic and social cost of the thousands who go missing, rather than the deemed-newsworthy, sensationalised matters that currently receive attention – in other words, an 'identified point of responsibility ... to lead and oversee this work, with the inclusion of a peer [family members] voice' (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014, p. 13).

The problem of missingness needs to be taken out of the 'too-hard' basket and addressed, as it is in this research. Those who go missing and those who are left behind are little recognised

at a societal level, apart from one week – National Missing Persons Week – and one day – International Missing Children’s Day – each year. At this level, recognition is dependent on the competing priorities of government, where policy and decision-makers and the media have the power to significantly influence the attention and support the phenomenon of missingness receives, both positively and negatively. When the presence and voices of the families of missing people are not heard and are thus disenfranchised because the few available services are eroded through lack of funding, those left behind are further hidden from the public view.

Without leadership prepared to demonstrate recognition, care, and concern in decision-making and priority-setting, the best efforts of individuals, community groups, and charities have limited effect. A number of organisations/agencies in Australia, at state and national level, continue to work to promote better understanding and increased awareness of various aspects of the missing persons phenomenon, while also providing advocacy for missing people and practical support for the families left behind (see Appendix 7). The capacity of these agencies to respond to the complex and geographically widespread support needs of those left behind is constrained by limited funding and systemic support. The failure at a political level to recognise the need for, and to commit adequate funding to, research and service delivery is responsible for the limited availability of ground-level services and mental health professionals trained and available to support families. Those who step in to attempt to fill the resultant gap in services are often beleaguered in their efforts.

In recent times, there has been both change and a gradual erosion of the very few services in the missing persons sector whose mandate is to work with those left behind, beyond a policing/investigative perspective. This has resulted in decreased participation and staffing within the missing persons sector. One such agency, the Salvation Army Family Tracing Service, was closed in 2018 (Find & Connect, 2018), while other agencies, such as the Red Cross, have shifted their focus to an international base. For those who continue to offer support, their resources are limited and there is little recognition of the presence of young people.

The low status the phenomenon of missingness is accorded in the current policy agenda at national and state level is evinced by the lack of funding of services, with the only services that focus on supporting those left behind being unfunded, charity-based, reliant on grants or limited to the one government-funded service, the NSW-based FFMPU. FFMPU remains the only government-funded service in Australia established to provide direct clinical and groupwork services to the family members and friends of missing people. This service is limited in its current capacity to provide services in NSW. Staffing numbers have been reduced by almost 50 per cent since 2015, suggesting there is little recognition of the benefit or support

of its service provision to families. This is despite being described by the current Attorney General in 2019 as ‘a ground-breaking initiative unique to Australia, providing free and confidential counselling and support with trained psychologists and social workers to help children and adults deal with the trauma of being left behind’ (NSW Government, 2019).

## **Service Providers Recognising Young People**

Twenty-eight service providers responded to the survey questionnaire. One of the questions was: ‘Whose responsibility is it to inform young people?’ Respondents unanimously expressed the belief that young people needed to be recognised, informed, and offered support when a loved one was missing, with two service providers from the missing persons sector writing that it was ‘everyone’s responsibility’ involving ‘all community members’ and ‘service providers, inclusive of search agencies’.

One respondent, a counsellor working in the missing persons sector, wrote: ‘We need to ask young people how they’re going and make sure that there is someone who is able to support them. We need to remember to ask the adults how the kids are going.’ Another recommended a ‘coordinated approach’, writing: ‘Families talk about how children need support from families, friends, school – principals, teachers.’

While every respondent supported this view, service providers acknowledged that identifying an adult who was present and psychologically available to talk to the young person was at times difficult. One service provider, who identified as a counsellor in a non-search agency, wrote: ‘I’m glad someone’s asking’, and then: ‘If young people are recognised, it’s often viewed as someone else’s responsibility. Parents, direct family members - someone needs to be identified as the person who makes sure they are given info.’

Several respondents identified the point at which the missing person report was made to police as the ‘logical referral point’ (a service provider in the missing persons sector) for young people, and the point at which the person calling could be asked about the presence of young people in the family of the missing person. Survey anonymity meant that it was not possible to identify police among the survey respondents, or whether they participated at all. While several service providers reported contact with families soon after the missing person report was made, they did not identify as police officers, nor did any respondent identify police as having made a referral for family support to any other agency in the missing persons sector. In circumstances where service providers were having contact with families closer to the time of the missing person report, four service providers indicated that they were employed within the missing persons sector. They identified that their contact was with an adult family member of the

missing person and that their primary focus was responding to the immediacy of the family member's distress and their presenting issues, rather than inquiring about the presence of young people in the family. One wrote: 'I am usually focused on the needs of the person calling, initially anyway. If there was subsequent contact with the client I would possibly enquire [about] the other members of the family, including young people.'

Several service providers reported contact with adults whose specific inquiry was in relation to supporting a young person. While service providers unanimously expressed their belief about the importance of including and ensuring support for young people, the majority of service providers who identified having come in contact directly with young people were those who did so later in the missing persons experience, sometimes inquiring about how to manage a difficult event or conversation: 'Adults often ask about what to tell the children about their missing loved one, or whether they should attend particularly difficult events, for example, Inquests.' Another service provider in the missing persons sector wrote: 'They [parents] often don't know what to say to children. Information may be hidden from them. Some say they told the child they [the missing person] are away on holiday, rather than missing, to spare them distress.'

None of the service provider respondents indicated they felt ill-equipped to respond to or support young people when the young person identified that a loved one was a missing person. Many identified their awareness of referral pathways, while acknowledging that such pathways were limited. One service provider from within the missing persons sector acknowledged the limited resources by asking: 'Who can offer/provide this specialised support beside FFMPU?' Fourteen service providers identified FFMPU, based in NSW, as an agency with which they had had contact or obtained information. None of the respondents identified other agencies or individual service providers with whom they had contact. For the few survey respondents who identified as being in regional areas, their location was not identified as a barrier to accessing telephone and online support. The most significant factor that influenced accessing support was that established services remained limited.

## **The School Response**

Outside the time young people spend with their families, interaction at a community level continues. For all participants in the research, except one who was pre-school age, each young person was attending school or university at the time their loved one went missing. By the time the young people participated in the research they were all in secondary school or had just completed their secondary schooling. The young people continued with their education –



moving from primary to secondary and, for some, tertiary studies or employment – despite the major disruption to their own and their families’ lives of their loved one going missing. The response to young people within the school environment is influenced by a number of factors and differed across the educational facilities the research participants attended. At primary school level, parents are more involved in day-to-day classroom activities and interact with teaching and support staff more often than they do in secondary school. By the time young people are in secondary school they do not want parental involvement with teaching and support staff, as parental involvement in the eyes of young people can single them out and suggest the young person is experiencing a difficulty. By the time a student is in tertiary study, there is generally no parental involvement or interaction with the institution.

‘The role of teachers is to teach’ (Personal communication, School Principal, 6 April 2020), and educators are not trained to be trauma workers. Most young people do not expect or want counselling or therapeutic intervention at school level because, at school, young people do not want to stand out, to be conspicuous because of their experience. They do, however, expect and hope that their loss is quietly and compassionately acknowledged, and a member of the school staff needs to be informed, and made aware that the student has experienced the loss of a missing loved one. This might be a member of the executive within the school, a year advisor or a school counsellor. This awareness within the school is the most significant determinant of the availability of support of any kind for the young person. Young people want to know that there is someone within the school environment who is aware of their experience, that their loved one is missing; however, they do not want to feel that they have become a curiosity to their peers or the staff. Young people want to be able to tell peers they trust in their own time and they want their privacy respected, while knowing there is someone and somewhere within the school that they can go to talk or to have time out.

Being recognised and feeling supported in the school environment is dependent on the initial interaction between the young person’s parent and the school in advising the school of the person’s disappearance. When parents initiate contact with the school and explain what the young person has experienced, the school is better placed to offer a supportive response to the young person. The greater the interaction between the parent and the school, the more likely support is to be offered in an ongoing way. This is an added pressure for parents in the midst of a difficult and traumatic time for every family; however, it remains important that it is done. Young people do not readily initiate conversations with school staff unless their parents have paved the way to do this. At times, parents need to be prompted by other service providers, keeping in mind that police may be the only service initially involved, to consider what is

happening for their young person and what their support needs might be. This prompting includes checking in that the parent has made contact with the young person's school.

## **My Experience of Service Providers as a Service Provider**

While not noted in the survey results, anecdotally, and in my extensive time coordinating service delivery to family members and friends in the missing persons sector, many service providers who had contact with those left behind in the early stages of the loved one being missing did not ask if there was a young person in the family. If the service provider's role focused on the search for the missing person, consideration of the support needs of those left behind was of lower priority and very rarely given. Regardless of the reasons for this, young people were potentially disenfranchised as a result. As previously acknowledged, young people recognised that their age precluded them from being the first point of contact. This meant that if a service provider did inquire about the need for support for those left behind, the question was likely to be directed to the adult initiating contact with the service provider. If the adult did not indicate a need for support for themselves or anyone else in the family, and the service provider accepted the answer without further inquiry about family composition and dynamics, then the presence of young people was never recognised. If their presence was unrecognised, then their need for information or support was never flagged or ascertained.

Likewise, none of the parents participating in this research reported that the service providers with whom they came in contact early in their experience of their loved one being missing had inquired about who else was in the family. No one had asked the parents who else had been informed about the loved one being missing, nor were the parents asked about their own information and support needs. It was the parents who participated in this research who identified their need for information and support and found it through word of mouth or by searching online.

The following scenario from 2014 unfolded in a phone call between a police officer and myself.

I answered a call from a police officer in regional NSW. The officer stated he was calling in relation to a man in his 40s who was missing in country NSW. The officer had mistakenly called FFMPU believing he was calling the NSW Police Missing Persons Unit (MPU). When I clarified that he had called Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit (I used the full name) and not MPU he thanked me and said he would call MPU to refer carriage of the matter to them. He was actually mistaken in thinking he could hand over a missing persons investigation to MPU, and unaware that at that time standard operating procedure was for

the Local Area Command (the name of local police at that time) to maintain carriage of the missing person's investigation. The missing man's age suggested to me that there was a likelihood that young people might have been part of that family, so I asked him before he rang off about the missing person's family, that is, about those left behind. However, the officer appeared ready to end the phone call and responded with, 'I don't have time for this'.

The phone call with this particular officer exemplified a number of gaps in knowledge of Standard Operating Procedures and/or misconceptions held by some – not all – police officers of which I became aware while working in the missing persons sector. These were as follows.

1. The misconception held by some officers that the carriage of missing persons investigations was not the responsibility of the Local Area Command (LAC).
2. The misconception based on a lack of understanding of the role of the Police Missing Persons Unit on the part of some police officers in LACs, namely, that MPUs managed the missing persons investigation.
3. The risk assessment conducted did not include any questions about the missing person's family.
4. The desire to refer missing persons matters on to the MPU precluded any inquiry or assessment on the part of LAC police about the family left behind.

When a family member or friend makes a missing person's report to police, the focus is entirely on the return of the missing person. In the early days of a loved one being missing, the need for support is understandably of lesser consequence for those left behind than the hope that the missing person will be safely returned. Those left behind want the situation resolved quickly with their missing loved one located safely. The prospect of the loved one being missing long-term is both a terrifying possibility and generally not verbalised. Therefore, anyone asking about the need for emotional support in the early days is likely to be dismissed.

## **The Police Response**

You get more attention, and you're dealt with more sympathetically if you're a victim of homicide person, than if you are [a family member of] a missing person. (Donna)

The presence of police, their dealings with families and the response of the officer assigned to the individual missing persons investigation are crucial factors in the days and years following a loved one's disappearance. The response provided by police influences how families cope and whether they access support for themselves and others within their family, regardless of the outcome of the police investigation. Police are the one common denominator in terms of service provision to the families of missing people. They are the only service providers with which every missing person's family has contact. For families whose loved one is a long-term missing person, contact with police may extend over many years. A service

provider who identified as a mental health professional within the missing persons sector recognised the influential role of police: ‘They are often the only agency consistently involved because of the missing person’s report.’

The young people’s perception of the seriousness with which police treat the investigation of their missing loved one, and the way police respond to their family members, is extremely important in establishing a ‘good relationship’ (Megan) with them. Police who work in partnership with other officers are better able to respond to more than just the next of kin in each family. This remains particularly important in families where geographical distance and communication tensions or disagreements mean that information is not always shared with all members of the family.

A number of service provider respondents to the survey questionnaire recognised that the immediate needs of the person making contact with police often took priority; however, a duty of care arose to ask about the welfare and support needs of others within the family as early as possible, and to revisit the question of support in subsequent contacts with family members and at key points in the investigation. Police, because of their central role with families, remain best placed to ask about the presence of young people and, if necessary, to prompt the parent or adult to consider the young person’s need for support or referral to an appropriate service. The recognition of the central role of police informed a mental health provider’s comment: ‘First point of call would be police who can then assess their needs in person and make referrals to counselling services and other organisations who can provide assistance, both practically and emotionally.’ This flags the possibility that support might be needed while conveying a message that normalises the response of those left behind. Being distressed by, and challenged with, living with not knowing is a normal reaction to ambiguous loss. For this reason, there is a need for police, as the usual first point of contact, to be both trauma-informed and aware of online and community-based support services.

A police response that focuses solely on conducting a missing persons investigation does not recognise the concomitant needs of families and young people. For police, an approach that includes coordinating the search, their primary responsibility, and also pays attention to a family’s support needs by inquiring about their welfare is recommended. The practice of this dual role has the potential to lessen the distress families report at feeling forgotten as communication with police decreases over time. The recommendation for a dual approach does not suggest a requirement to become proficient in mental health service delivery, but it does require a trauma-informed approach and an understanding of the impact of ambiguous loss.

Those left behind need more than investigative support. It is the failure to recognise this that contributes to the lack of recognition families feel and the failure to recognise young people. Only when their complex needs are acknowledged can service providers begin to address them. While the focus remains solely on locating the missing person, the various needs of those left behind will be overlooked.

### **The Need for a Trauma-informed Response**

The experience of trauma is readily associated with an act of violence, often occurring in the context of a crime being perpetrated against another person. Going missing is not a crime and the majority of missing people are not known or suspected to be missing as a result of a crime being committed against them. Despite this, the experience for those left behind, including young people, is inherently traumatic and, when a loved one is missing long-term, it is traumatic in an ongoing way.

Those who come into contact with young people who have experienced the loss of a missing person need to be trauma-informed in their approach. Poole et al. (2013) recommend the establishment of safety, trustworthiness, collaboration, empowerment, and choice as the key principles of a trauma-informed response. There is increasing recognition of the benefits of being trauma-informed when working with people who present in crisis and have experienced trauma in their lives (Police Scotland, 2020). Increasingly, service providers – not only mental health professionals – are moving towards providing a trauma-informed response. Such a response can justifiably include responding to families who have experienced the trauma of missingness.

As this research has shown, the trauma young people experience is not related to a single traumatic incident or incidents located in the past. Their trauma is past and present – associated with the disappearance of their loved one, that loved one’s continuing missingness and the ongoing impact felt in the young person’s daily life. This deserves recognition, rather the feelings of dismissal or minimisation that is the experience reported by many young people and their families. This is reinforced in the response to one young person, who was told: ‘She’s only missing, worse things have happened in my life’ (FFMPU, 2016a).

A trauma-informed approach acknowledges and asks about the presence of young people and ensures that young people and adults do not have to repeatedly articulate their experience to be recognised and offered support. Having to do so has the potential to retraumatise those left behind, who feel they have little control over when and how they share their experience.

Young people repeatedly refer to others who ‘get it’, describing those in their lives whom they trust, who recognise their trauma and who respond to them with compassion and understanding. People who ‘get it’ are not only essential at parent and caregiver level but also in the various contexts and systems in which young people and their families interact. Young people rely on parents to initiate contact with service providers in the early days of their loved one being missing. Years after their loved one’s disappearance, others initiate contact themselves with service providers, seeking information and support about the continuing challenges of living with not knowing, sometimes expressing feelings of embarrassment and inadequacy about not having coped ‘better’ with their loved one’s disappearance. Such feelings are fuelled by the opinions of others, including family members but more often those further removed from the impact of the loss, who hold the mistaken view that moving on and finding closure is the way to cope with the loss of a missing loved one. Survey respondents demonstrated their understanding of the need for recognition and support for young people, while acknowledging their awareness of situations where this did not occur, where other service providers appeared to have little understanding of trauma or ambiguous loss.

Just as young people and parents describe feeling helpless and at a loss to know what to do, service providers at times expressed similar feelings in terms of what to offer families, practically or emotionally. My own conversations with service providers in the course of my work revealed anxieties about working with families, especially young people, when a loved one is missing: ‘I know what to do when there’s been a death, but I don’t know what to do with the families’ (Personal communication, Police Officer, 2015). If the approach of the service provider is solution-focused or problem-solving, the lack of resolution inherent in missingness and the persistent ‘problem’ of the missing person remaining missing long-term can potentially be another trigger for anxiety. For many families – whether encountered as participants in this research or in the course of my work – there is a sense that they are avoided by service providers and others who do not know how to respond to their loss. The added complexity of interacting with young people can further heighten feelings of uncertainty about whether, and how, to approach a family, and even how to ask whether there are young people within the family left behind.

## **Interagency Collaboration and Cooperation**

Young people observed a lack of engagement and cooperation between the various agencies and families in the missing persons sector at the time of their loved one going missing. Tara recalled: ‘What they [her parents] struggled with was getting cooperation. They were

staggered that there was no cooperation between the agencies – Salvos, Wayside Chapel, police, and hospital services.’

Interagency collaboration continues to present considerable challenges in terms of buy-in and systemic support at every level and is made more difficult by geographically widespread agencies and individuals. Currently in Australia, there is one interagency meeting in the missing persons sector, facilitated by FFMPU in NSW. In this quarterly meeting, agencies and a family member representative ‘come together to share information, to discuss developments and research, and to explore ways we can work together. These meetings ensure that families and friends of missing people receive appropriate support and information when someone is missing’ (FFMPU, 2020, 6 March). Once again, a champion – someone who is well-informed, and prepared to support and encourage engagement – is needed at a senior level in government to ensure that the opportunities and benefits of collaboration are not lost as a consequence of lack of support at this level.

Interagency collaboration at state and national, government and non-government level, including representation at policy-making and service delivery level within the key agencies of education, health, justice, and policing, is essential. There is an opportunity to build capacity, to address the problem and to commit to service provision for those affected by missingness. There is the potential to establish communication pathways between policy-makers, service providers, family representatives, and even the media. Agencies that work solely in the missing persons sector, and others that intersect while also providing other services, such as some parts of policing, are able to build capacity to provide wide-ranging support to the families of missing people, and to young people, whose presence needs to be acknowledged on the interagency agenda.

To this end, McDonald and Rosier (2011) suggest the possibility of joint case management, the formation of multi-agency working groups and the cross-training of staff – the last having occurred between FFMPU, NSW Police and AFP. These were identified as benefits of interagency collaboration. Just as ‘the role of teachers is to teach’ (see Chapter 9, p. 154), while police coordinate the investigation into the disappearance of the missing person, and other services provide practical, emotional, and advocacy support, a multi-disciplinary systemic response ensures that those providing the services are able to share the responsibility and workload, and that those seeking their services have their needs recognised and met by agencies that are trained, well-informed, and appropriately equipped.

## **Professional Development, Training, and Psychoeducation**

If you're a family member of someone who's [a victim of] homicide you get all the support and police are trained to talk to you about that; but missing – you're left in the dark. You have to find your own way through it. The police don't tell you. They don't even know FFMPU exists. (Donna)

Young people, parents, and service providers all identify gaps in their own and others' awareness and understanding of mental health, trauma, grief, loss and, specifically, missing persons issues. To suggest that everyone needs to complete training in all of these issues is both impractical and unreasonable, given the current significant demands on time and resources. There is, however, a place for professional development and training for police, education, and mental health staff to ensure that, as service providers, they are equipped with the requisite skills to respond to those left behind, including young people, when a loved one is missing. Requisite skills include being able to respond to family members with compassion and some understanding of their experience from a non-judgemental position, which characterises the basic principles of a trauma-informed response. To approach and respond to families from this position does not imply a requirement that every service provider is trained to provide a mental health response, but rather a response that is sufficiently well-informed through professional development and training. This applies to the various service providers with whom the families of missing people have contact, including those in police, education, health, and justice. Some survey respondents and other service providers. (FFMPU, 2010) indicated that they felt ill-equipped to acknowledge the presence and support needs of those left behind and of being unfamiliar with referral options. They express uncertainty about where to refer or direct a family member to locate the information and support they might need, and also to be able to inquire sensitively about the presence of young people and discuss with them or their parents the options for referral and support.

A professional development agenda needs to be developed through interagency collaboration and a willingness to prioritise and expand current training. Professional development for police officers is limited on the topic of missing persons (verbal communication, Detective, NSW Police, 30 January 2020). Currently, training occurs at undergraduate level and only in relation to policing practice and investigation. Training that enhances the understanding of frontline police in relation to ambiguous loss and mental health is necessary.



Existing teacher training addresses significant issues that include child protection and the special needs of torture and trauma victims (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2020). Ambiguous loss and mental health are significant issues equally deserving of attention and, therefore, of an expansion of postgraduate teacher training to include both topics.

Until 2019, FFMPU staff, in collaboration with the NSW Police MPU, provided limited training for policing students about missing persons issues, touching on the psychosocial impact of missingness. A police educator acknowledged, however, that ‘young officers do not understand the long-term consequences for families’ (Personal communication, 8 April 2020). The NSW Police Missing Persons Registry (formerly the MPU) is planning to offer missing persons-specific training to police in the field (Personal communication, Police Officer, 29 January 2020), which may go some way to addressing the difficulties and challenges frontline police encounter.

Staffing changes at FFMPU since 2015 have resulted in a discontinuation of in-service training to police at Police Area Command (PAC) level. NSW Police Education Development Officers (EDOs) are responsible for organising training at PAC level. Part of their training agenda has included missing persons issues and the impact of missingness on families. The Missing Persons Advocacy Network, a charitable organisation based in Victoria, is currently funding training for mental health providers in private practice to upskill and enable them to provide online therapeutic support to families of missing people, in the form of emotional health check-ins online.

While none of the research participants indicated they were aware of schools having guidelines in place for supporting young people when a loved one was missing, guidelines are not a pre-requisite for young people to feel supported. Recognising that the young person has experienced a traumatic loss and being trauma-informed appears to be a positive starting point for teachers and school counsellors in ensuring the young person feels recognised and able to ask for support or time out if needed. Continuing professional development for teachers that promotes awareness of the psychosocial issues that impact young people is required. Professional development days, which occur regularly in all schools, could include the topics of trauma, grief, and loss. Psychoeducation in the school setting for young people on topics including mental health and self-care will help to promote inclusion and resilience.

## **Current Support Options**

Support for those left behind is a very broad term that encompasses practical and referral support, advocacy, and counselling/therapeutic support (see Chapter 7). Working with the

families of missing people is uncharted territory for many service providers, potentially adding to their reluctance to consider the needs of, and to engage with, young people, again flagging the need for education in relation to a trauma-informed response and health literacy. Service providers can be hesitant to intervene – implying that specific training on the subject of missing persons and/or child development is a prerequisite for working with young people affected by the loss of a missing person.

Parents and caregivers, those who are most often the referrers to a range of support services for young people, may themselves require psychosocial support and education to assist them to cope and to fulfil this support role. As parents discover upon learning about ambiguous loss, demystifying the subject through access to psychoeducational material can assist in reducing the pressure of often self-imposed expectations to provide answers and solutions to every question and difficulty.

Young people need reliable and easy access to online information and resources, targeted specifically at them. Resources need to be age- and developmentally appropriate and to allow the young person anonymity when accessing them. The limited resources currently available specifically for young people need to be promoted across agencies. While a number of agencies in Australia have produced useful guides for families and service providers to access online or in-print resources, there needs to be greater space given to resources specifically for young people. Best practice in interagency collaboration would see these guides shared beyond the agency or organisation responsible for production and promoted online across agencies. The *In the Loop* booklet is currently the only resource that meets this requirement (FFMPU, 2016a), as evidenced by its availability in Australia, the UK, and Canada. It is available online and in hard copy, but its availability needs to be promoted and its accessibility for young people and parents needs to be expanded. Ease of access to relevant information that does not require extensive searching is essential. People in crisis can be easily discouraged if information is difficult and time-consuming to locate, or if online links are broken.

Outside the missing persons sector, online services specifically directed at young people – such as Kids Helpline (Kids Helpline, 2020), which works with ‘kids, teens and young adults’ aged from five to 25 years – were identified as a ‘logical source of information’ (Service provider, Study 3). The closest adult equivalent is Lifeline (Lifeline, 2020). Neither of these 24-hour online and telephone crisis services mentions missing people, their family members or young people, although, anecdotally, Lifeline has provided support to family members with missing loved ones. In the United Kingdom, Missing People UK (Missing People, 2016) provides a comprehensive range of innovative services; however, its work with young people

remains limited. There are agencies in Australia doing innovative and engaging work with those left behind, including FFMPU in NSW and MPAN in Victoria, but they remain constrained by funding or financial limitations and lack of recognition by those who have the power to support and promote them. Their capacity to provide outreach services and services specifically for young people is limited. Creative, youth-specific options to attract and engage young people online are required, as is access to online/virtual support groups designed specifically for young people. The viability of a 24-hour helpline, as offered by Missing People UK, within or separate to existing crisis lines for adults and young people, needs to be investigated, and an online support group meeting for young people needs to be considered.

## **Different Approaches**

Most young people do not actively seek out therapeutic/mental health support services without support from parents or caregivers, although some who were young at the time of their loved one going missing may seek mental health support later in life. Feeling connected to others who recognise qualities of strength and resilience and individual efforts to cope is empowering for young and old. Young people do not engage with mental health professionals who try to ‘fix’ or pathologise their experience or prescribe how they or any family member should live with ambiguous loss. A strengths-based approach in working with young people recognises their resilience, determination, and need for autonomy. It does not overlook their ongoing struggles but allows them to acknowledge their efforts to cope with all that follows their loved one’s disappearance – and, ultimately, allows them to take the position that it’s okay not to know. Young people continue to reflect on their experiences and seek to better understand what they observe within their own families. Through their own resilience, young people are able to find meaning and the answers they seek, not only about their missing loved one but also about living with having a missing loved one, about living with not knowing. One young person, Margot, accessed mental health support briefly and spoke with counsellors from the FFMPU team, but in reading *Ambiguous Loss* (Boss, 1999) she found a way of approaching ambiguous loss that resonated with her own experience. It freed her from having to find absolute answers about her missing loved one and offered her a way to live more comfortably with not knowing.

Traditional approaches to grief and loss have contributed to a lack of understanding about the nature and impact of ambiguous loss and how those affected by such a loss can be supported. No matter what their level of education, training or professional role, service providers need to be receptive to a view that moves beyond traditional understandings. Boss

(2006) offers comprehensive guidelines for professionals responding to those living with losses characterised by uncertainty or ambiguity. Information about working with those affected by ambiguous loss is readily available if approached from a position of being receptive to new learning. An awareness and acceptance of less traditional ways of approaching grief and loss and different grieving styles is proposed. One such example is the Dual Process Model (see Chapter 2, p. 20) which allows space for young people to spend time focusing on the loss they have experienced and their feelings of grief, combined with time to focus on their day-to-day activities. This research has shown that young people feel supported and understood by people who ‘get it’ when they are allowed to move forward with everyday living while keeping their missing loved one psychologically present in the midst of a range of emotions.

## **An Identified Gap**

As discussed, the need for social support and connection for families with missing loved ones remains largely unmet in most Australian states. The exceptions are NSW, where FFMPU is providing limited counselling and support services, and Victoria, where MPAN is offering practical support and advocacy to families of missing people, and some training for counsellors to upskill them to complete online mental health check-ins with those left behind. Additionally, at the time of writing face-to-face individual and support group meetings are unavailable as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Until March 2020, FFMPU continued to facilitate adult support group meetings, although there have been insufficient staff to facilitate a separate support group meeting for young people. Given the geographically widespread location of families and the sparsely populated nature of Australia, it has not been possible to physically bring together sufficient numbers of family members. The situation continues to change, with online support – the only currently available option – having the benefit of mitigating geographical limitations and social isolation.

In 2020, in the midst of a worldwide COVID-19 pandemic, where millions of people are practising social distancing and living in enforced isolation, much of the world’s population is severely limited in its ability to freely move about in society. The uncertainty of current and long-term impacts on mental health and well-being means that responses are being developed ‘on the run’. While the usual support networks are unavailable, the coping capacities of many people are understandably challenged and the need for practical and psychosocial support and connection continues. Already limited and overstretched resources available to people in crisis, and to the families of missing people in particular, are further restricted. The establishment of new avenues and opportunities for information-sharing and social connection presents

challenges for individuals, communities, and society, while online options remain the universal means for delivering a range of services to service providers and to those left behind. Video conferencing, a long-time option for geographically isolated consumers of a range of services, may become the preferred – if not the only – means of ‘meeting’ clients for many service providers and is currently being used by agencies in the missing persons sector (Personal communication, 8 April, 2020). Conversely, the weeks of lockdown since March 2020 have accustomed many to the potential of social media to provide a viable alternative to face-to-face transactions (Gadiel, 2020).

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has presented the key findings on the role of service providers and the current situation with regard to service provision, explicating the need for a trauma-informed response and professional development, training, and psychoeducation for service providers at every level of the system. While the recommendations for service delivery, and especially trauma-informed services, are written specifically with regard to working with young people who have experienced the ambiguous loss of a missing person, the recommendations are relevant for those left behind when a loved one is missing, regardless of age. There is also scope for agencies and service providers outside the missing persons sector to be trauma-informed and to have an understanding of ambiguity that encompasses a range of other losses experienced in life. The following and final chapter will provide an overview of the research in terms of its strengths and limitations and present the significance of the findings for current theory and future research and practice.

# **CHAPTER 10**

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

### **Introduction**

This research brings the experience of young people for whom a loved one is a long-term missing person into the spotlight. The thesis demonstrates the magnitude and complexity of the impact of the loss of a missing loved one on the lives of young people and their families. This chapter begins with a recap of the main points addressed in preceding chapters, followed by a discussion of the findings that relate to the primary aims of the research – namely, recognising the experience of young people and identifying and responding to their psychosocial support needs.

This chapter draws on the results presented in previous chapters to discuss the irrevocable change missingness brings to the lives of young people, and the need for the support offered to young people to be inclusive and for those who support young people to be trauma-informed. Recommendations for purposeful inclusion of young people, a trauma-informed response to service delivery and interagency collaboration are discussed. Finally, the chapter considers the strengths and limitations of the present investigation and outlines the significance of the findings for theory, research, and practice.

### **Overview of the Research**

The literature review in Chapter 2 stepped into the world of missing people, highlighting the incidence and impact of missing persons on the community, both nationally and in NSW. There are 38,000 people reported missing to police each year in Australia or approximately one person every 15 minutes (James et al., 2008). When considered in the light of an average of 12 people affected for every person who is reported missing (Henderson & Henderson, 1998), this extrapolates to a significant number of people. The phenomenon of people going missing as a social problem in Australian and New South Wales (NSW) jurisdictions was discussed. A focus on the grief, loss, and trauma literature, with particular emphasis on ambiguous loss and disenfranchised grief, as they apply to the experience of young people, was presented.

While there is only limited literature pertaining to the experience of adults living with the loss of a long-term missing person (Boss, 1999; Clark, 2007; Glasscock, 2011; Wayland,

2015), the research pertaining specifically to the experience of young people – how they live with not knowing, and who recognises their presence, responds to, and supports them – is very limited. This thesis was prompted by the realisation that young people are almost invisible within the left-behind population, a situation of which I became aware as I embarked on my work in the missing persons sector, moving from practitioner social worker to researcher. Interacting with family members and friends of all ages, training with and training mental health professionals and other service providers and observing and providing input about policy-making provided the impetus to begin this research in an area sorely needing attention.

In Chapter 3 the overarching aims of the research and the research questions for each of the three studies were outlined. The aims were *to develop and promote an understanding of the experience of young people when a loved one is missing, to describe the role of parents in responding to the support needs of young people, and the way these support needs are acknowledged and responded to by parents, carers, and service providers*. The qualitative methodological approach employed to address the aims of the research was explicated in Chapter 4. Semi-structured interviews were used to gather data from 18 participants in Studies 1 and 2. These were ten young people – a sibling, child or cousin of a missing loved one – in Study 1 who narrated their lived experience. Eight parents who were the primary carers of a young person when their loved one went missing described their role in Study 2. In Study 3, an online survey questionnaire sought responses from service providers to *understand their practice in recognising and supporting those left behind, including young people*, when a loved one is missing. (The italicised words summarise the research aims.) Twenty-eight service providers responded to the questionnaire.

In Chapter 5, I introduced the missing people, the young people and the parents, and the survey respondents. An interpretive phenomenological approach to data analysis was selected to identify the key themes: recognising young people, living with not knowing, a growing awareness, and supporting young people. These themes were then explicated in the chapters that followed. Chapter 6 began with a synopsis of the experience of two young people whose demographic information was quite similar but whose experiences of living with not knowing, and of being offered and accessing support differed considerably. The equally significant voices of the other eight young people described the impact of living with uncertainty and ambiguity characterised by the physical absence and the psychological presence of their missing loved one. Young people described missingness as a lonely, isolating experience within their families, communities, and schools when others failed to recognise their presence, the impact of their loved one's disappearance on them and the distress they felt. They

interpreted such responses from the adults around them, including parents, friends, and teachers, as uncaring in some instances. In some instances, those outside the missing person's family were genuinely unaware or uninformed about what had occurred, while others appeared to dismiss and overlook the young person's resultant distress, leaving the young person to deal with their distress in isolation.

Important relationships with family members, caregivers, and peers change when a loved one goes missing. Young people are able to successfully build strong connections with people they trust and value and with whom they feel safe; however, close familial relationships were tested and strained when young people came to the realisation that their experience was not recognised as traumatic, distressing and, most importantly, ongoing. When this occurred, young people were not offered the support they hoped to receive.

Chapter 7 addressed the theme of young people searching for answers. The relationship young people shared with those closest to them – often, but not always, their parents – became instrumental in the recognition they received for their presence as part of the missing person's family, and in the support they were able to access if they chose to. When parents and other adults struggled to deal with their own feelings of distress and grief, young people came to understand that raising the missing person's absence was a trigger for devastating distress; consequently, questions, conversations and any making of memories were avoided. When young people identified relationships that were supportive and meaningful with people who were emotionally available and 'got it', they took that opportunity to share memories and practise rituals that enabled them to keep their missing loved one psychologically present. Put simply, psychologically present parents and caregivers were able to establish a safe, secure environment in which the ongoing psychological presence of the missing loved one was permitted and encouraged. These relationships were a most important protective factor for their wellbeing – supporting and enabling them to remain engaged with others, to cope with the many changes that occurred for them as young people and to move forward with their lives. Most importantly, young people wanted to be accepted non-judgementally as young people, and to be able to engage in both previously enjoyed and new activities.

To keep missing loved ones psychologically present, young people developed rituals that involved partners, parents, siblings, friends, and their own babies and children. As young people wanting to be allowed to participate in the planning and timing of rituals, so they found meaning in and derived comfort from connecting with others and sharing memories and rituals with people who entered their lives after the loved one's disappearance, including extended family, intimate partners, and their own children. Some did this despite earlier experiences of



the disappearance appearing to be ignored or having their missing loved one ‘removed’ (Margot) from their lives. Young people need to have the opportunity to be included in collaborating with others in the timing of rituals, finding ways of remembering the missing loved one and making meaning of what has taken place. This remained as important decades later as it had been in the early days of their loved one being missing.

Young people are able to develop their own strategies for coping with the challenges of living with not knowing. They demonstrate and are able to recognise and acknowledge positive qualities in themselves that they value, as many of the parents also recognised. Resilience, determination, a capacity for compassion and ‘empathy’ (Eliza) are evident. The ability to compartmentalise difficult emotions and ‘to park’ (Sally) distressing information to enable them to go about their lives and focus on day-to-day tasks are skills young people developed. Despite the ripple effect of a loved one going missing, young people wanted and were able to ‘get on with living’ (Eliza).

Chapter 8 identified the various systems with which young people interacted and in which they found the support they needed through informal and formal networks. While their own family members were the most significant source of support (when emotionally available), their presence did not significantly mitigate the understandable feelings of sadness and grief. Their presence was, nonetheless, a source of solace, ensuring young people were purposefully included in the aftermath of their loved one going missing. Parents and other caregivers were instrumental in advocating for and referring young people to the available support services to meet their young person’s needs.

Chapter 9 discussed the service provider response to those left behind, informed by the findings from Study 3 and interactions with service providers in the missing persons sector. Young people seeking and accessing support, and service provision at every level, from the family response to the community and through to the policy makers, were discussed.

### **Missingness: An Irrevocable Change for Young People**

My older sister, Joanne, was kidnapped when she was 11 years old [in 1973]. It changed my life forever even though I wasn’t even born at the time. (Suzie, Humans in Melbourne, October 21, 2018)

This statement, shared publicly via social media, exemplifies the profound and prolonged impact on young people and the families of missing loved ones and provides further evidence that young people’s lives are irrevocably changed when a loved one becomes a missing person.

Regardless of the duration of missingness, young people's lives are affected in unimagined, unanticipated, and understandably detrimental ways: 'It gives you something, but it feels like it takes away a lot' (Eliza). Young people experience missingness as traumatic, describing feelings of shock, ongoing distress, loneliness, isolation, a loss of control, and uncertainty for their future. Feelings of grief for the life and the relationships young people had known prior to their loved one going missing are commonly reported. The demands of everyday life, practical, emotional, and psychological, continue for young people in the aftermath of a loved one going missing and everyone struggles to cope with a loss that remains ambiguous. Young people identify changes, not only in themselves but in the lives of those around them and can never know what might have been different in their lives had they not been confronted by such a significant loss. It is a loss rendered potentially more traumatic for young people as it coincides with the transition from childhood through adolescence and into adulthood. Everyday demands and the expectations associated with learning, socialising, and spending time with friends continue for young people, while at the same time they and their families focus on coping from day to day.

Parents, friends, and other adults, including service providers, are influential in how young people cope and move forward with their lives. The impact of the loss is intensified when their trauma is not recognised. When ambiguity is acknowledged and tolerated as an inevitable, unavoidable consequence of missingness by those within the young person's family and those in their wider networks, young people experience the response of others towards them as non-judgemental and accepting. Similarities and differences in the way young people – indeed, people of any age – express their grief are normal. While young people do not forget their missing loved one or 'move on', as so often implied as an expectation or imperative, they do continue to move forward with their lives. Everyday demands and the expectations associated with learning, socialising, and spending time with friends continue. Young people are able to, and should be allowed to, do both – that is, to acknowledge the ongoing missingness of their loved one and to express this in their own way and in their own time. They need to be given tacit permission to be young people, to continue to be engaged in living, learning that it is possible to live with a profound loss and to find enjoyment in life.

Young people build new relationships, sometimes from unexpected beginnings, with people who recognise and share similar feelings of loss. In some circumstances young people met and connected with others who 'got it' only after their loved became a missing person. With some they shared familial or relational bonds. They may have been geographically distant from each other, making an effort to meet and connect many years after their loved one's

disappearance. The loss the young person experienced was also recognised by people who had never met their missing loved one, including people who entered the young person's life after their loved one's disappearance. These included intimate partners and children born years later. Having met the missing person prior to their disappearance is not a prerequisite for missing them, for feeling and being aware of the impact of their disappearance, as Suzie's words at the beginning of this section attest, nor for being able to understand ambiguity. Young people felt not only their own loss but also a sense of loss for those who would never meet the loved one they missed. These people were able to recognise the young person's experience and needs when others who had been physically present at the time of the disappearance appeared unable to do so.

## **Purposeful Inclusion of Young People**

Purposeful inclusion in all that follows their loved one going missing helps to ensure that young people access the information, advice, and support they require. To do this, young people are reliant on the adults in their families and communities to provide information that is truthful, age-appropriate, and timely. Parents, predominantly, but also other caregivers, can become powerful advocates on their behalf, ensuring they are included and supported in a safe and secure environment. Parental and caregiver advocacy with agencies and service providers is necessary to remind service providers, including police and educators, that young people are an important part of a family impacted by the loss of a missing person. Young people expect that those to whom they are closest will perform this role, and when those closest do not step up, the impact of what has occurred is intensified. The trauma they understandably experience is exacerbated by feelings of isolation and silence.

Informing a young person that their loved one is missing is the first of many examples and opportunities for inclusion that follow a loved one's disappearance. Permission to ask questions, voice their opinions and express emotion contributes to young people feeling recognised, positively valued and heard within their families and wider networks. Young people who feel included, whether informally – 'just around the table together' (Megan) – or more formally – through attendance, for example, at a missing persons event or meeting – feel recognised, heard, and able to contribute in a meaningful way. The maxim that 'children should be seen and not heard' suggests that young people should remain silent and be protected from distressing or confronting information, whereas the opposite is recommended.

The ongoing search and hoped-for return of the missing person, while highly distressing, provide a sense of purpose and focus. As time passes, active searching may diminish as

information dries up, for both police and families, and the possibility that the loved one might not be found alive or never be found, become a possibility. Young people observe their parents and other family members desperately searching for strategies to keep the search and hope alive, continuing to seek answers and meaning, but also ‘lost’ (Eliza) in terms of knowing what to do next. Rather than seeking closure, which has been acknowledged as unattainable for those left behind (Boss, 1999), young people ‘learn how to adjust to the pain of missing someone’ (Tara). Being able to ‘do something’ (Margot) for their missing loved one, when they may feel powerless to do anything, brings comfort. They want and welcome the opportunity to establish rituals, to remember, celebrate, and honour their missing loved one. Young people demonstrate resilience and creativity in these acts, deriving pleasure from sharing memories of their loved one and time spent together.

### **Normalising Support for Young People**

Experiencing a loss that is both unexpected and remains ambiguous is challenging. The possibility that young people might need support should not be perceived as an indicator of an inability to cope or weakness. The difficulties young people experience do not result from their youth or lack of life experience – experienced by young and old alike, they are caused by ambiguity. Young people acknowledge that feeling supported and accessing support are beneficial in helping to reduce feelings of isolation and loneliness. Informal or formal support, including mental health support (see Chapter 7), offered and accessed at a time of the young person’s choosing, can help to promote resilience and potentially prevent longer-term mental health difficulties. People of all ages who feel they belong to a support network do better over time than those who are isolated (Reblin & Uchino, 2009).

Young people who are purposefully included and allowed to contribute their opinions and ideas feel recognised and validated. Opportunities to connect with others are essential. Those who attended the In the Loop support group meetings and other missing persons events were able to connect with others, many of whom they had never met. They did this knowing they were supported by the adults in their families. In meeting other young people who shared and negotiated similar experiences, they coincidentally met other parents, grandparents, and siblings. They shared their stories of their lived experience, stories of how they had coped and negotiated the uncharted territory of missingness in which they, and their families, found themselves. Their stories are filled with examples of their courage, sadness, and resilience. Young people experienced a sense of being experts in their own lives, feeling well-placed to offer support to others who might face a similar loss and confident in their own ability to cope

and to share their expertise. Each young person needed, however, to feel safe, secure, and in control of the timing of any intervention or contact with others.

## **A Trauma-informed System**

Parents, caregivers, and service providers from a range of agencies who come into contact with young people and their families may need support to understand the dynamics of missingness and the impact of trauma. Parents who had accessed support and information for themselves, and who had some understanding of the dynamics of ambiguous loss, recognised the benefits of connecting with others with a shared lived experience, both for themselves and their young people. Just as young people learn that it is ‘alright to say you don’t have to know’ (Margot), so those who come in contact with and support young people are able to become more comfortable with holding a similar position. Through training and education, service providers can come to the realisation that they do not need to have all of the answers in a situation where there are often more questions than answers. Service providers who are trauma-informed are better able to respond compassionately and non-judgementally to those who are left behind, acknowledging that the search for answers and meaning is not an indicator of being stuck or ‘obsessed’ (Margaret) but, rather, an understandable response to a situation that remains ambiguous.

Mental health professionals and service providers (including police officers and educators), working collaboratively, are best placed to recognise the presence of young people within families impacted by the traumatic loss of a missing person. Training that promotes the development of health literacy, including a beginning knowledge of ambiguous loss and mental health, forms a foundational part of being trauma-informed. Just as young people are reliant on the adults around them, so too they are reliant on police and other service providers for information not just in relation to the investigation but also regarding referral and support options.

The need for a trauma-informed response to young people is essential in ensuring they are recognised, included, and treated with compassion. Many young people whose loved one is missing continue to fall into a service delivery gap. A compassionate response should not be confined to an interpersonal level but extended to inform policy and decision-making. As long as young people’s trauma is not recognised at this level, or at any level within the systemic response, they will continue to be disenfranchised.

## **Acquiring Health Literacy**

Young people acknowledge the need for those with whom they have contact to be better-informed about their experience of living with not knowing. They acknowledge their own and their parents' limited understanding of issues relating to mental health, trauma, grief, and ambiguous loss. They are also aware of the limited understanding across all systems of the missing persons phenomenon in relation to the lived experience of young people. The fact that they are young people adds another layer of complexity. Young people recognise that the systems with which they have contact are often unprepared and ill-equipped to respond to them, and the need for service providers to be health literate about the issues young people face is unanimously acknowledged by young people and their parents. There is general agreement that many service providers have little awareness of issues relating to mental health, trauma, grief and ambiguous loss, and almost no understanding of the young person's experience of living with the loss of a missing person.

Increased health literacy, ranging from the individual to the family and caregiver level, extending into the community context where service providers, investigators, educators in schools and universities, and mental health professionals intervene, and, finally, into the broader societal context, assists in making a trauma-informed approach possible. Young people strongly express the view that schools have an important part to play by ensuring that teaching staff have fundamental information about mental health, grief, and loss to enable them to respond to young people compassionately and supportively. The experience of young people indicates that teaching staff require psychoeducation to better understand the impact of significant life events and normal grief responses to a range of losses, including the loss of a missing person.

In this field, a significant aspect of health literacy is 'ambiguous loss literacy'. It requires that those left behind, as well as service providers, have some understanding of the nature of ambiguous loss and are prepared to consider that there is more than one way to approach any loss experience and, thus, more than one way to grieve. Respect for and tolerance of different coping strategies and different opinions – sometimes within families and across generations – is essential. Boss (2006, p. 21) refers to the 'sharing of perceptions' – reflected in the data regarding the different opinions and coping strategies used by young people, their parents, and their grandparents. Respect for and tolerance of difference and opinion characterise a trauma-informed approach.

A cultural learning shift towards shared responsibility and becoming trauma-informed is recommended. Only when service providers are trauma-informed and recognise the benefits of such an approach can inclusive and best practice be achieved. In doing so, service providers are more able to be alert to the possibility of young people requiring support for the trauma they have experienced and may continue to experience. This is not to suggest that service providers whose role is not one of therapeutic intervention need to be trained as mental health clinicians. It is reasonable, however, to expect that mental health clinicians, including school counsellors, have some understanding of ambiguous loss, assuming that they are already familiar with the impact of grief and loss, as their qualifications would suggest. Mental health providers from within the missing persons sector and working in community-based trauma services are well-placed to train other staff in a trauma-informed approach.

### **Promoting Interagency Collaboration**

This research raises issues of service coordination, delivery and participation. While it is widely acknowledged that interagency collaboration and service coordination have far-reaching benefits and political and professional acceptance, support at political/policy-making and government level is required. Currently, there is little awareness of or observable interest in the significance of the problem of missingness at this level. An absence of support at a political level, and subsequent funding reductions, has the potential to further marginalise missing people and those who are left behind.

At a political/policy-making level there is a requirement for insight and compassion, as is expected of and evident in service providers within the missing persons sector. Just as other significant social issues and problems are deemed worthy of a high-level response and recognition, acceptance that the social problem of missing people and their families is worthy of resource allocation and funding is recommended. Just as FFMPU was funded at NSW state government level in 2000, the need for further funding to reach families nationally, and to actively respond to the young people within these families, is imperative.

There is a need to identify someone at the national level prepared to champion missingness and to provide high-level organisational leadership and executive support. This champion could come from executive within justice, police, education or health portfolios. Family members, individual services, and agencies should not shoulder alone the responsibility to promote what should be a shared cause – another powerful argument for interagency collaboration.

It is the ambiguity of missingness that allows a piecemeal response to what is a complex, systemic problem. This piecemeal response arises from agencies working in isolation, failing to communicate or work collaboratively with other agencies whose roles might be similar (or quite different). The problem of missingness requires a multi-disciplinary, multi-agency response, rather than a response from individual service providers or agencies who, despite promoting and delivering worthwhile, professional services, are unable to respond to the myriad challenges those who are left behind experience. Government and non-government agencies working collaboratively can begin to model best practice if a collaborative rather than a competitive stance is adopted.

Interagency collaboration facilitates best practice through the sharing of responsibilities and tasks, relieving any one agency of carrying the responsibility for every aspect of the missing persons experience and ensuring that agencies and service providers do not work in isolation (McDonald & Rosier, 2011) or, in a financially-competitive environment, in competition with each other. Collaboration relieves the pressure on any single agency to attempt to meet the complex and various challenges that arise when a loved one goes missing.

Enhancement and promotion of existing interagency collaboration has the potential to facilitate greater efficiency of service delivery and to minimise duplication of services in the missing persons sector, where resources are limited, and services are geographically distant from each other. Collaboration rather than competition enables transparent sharing of these limited resources. As online platforms are increasingly the preferred – and sometimes only – means of communication, the barriers of limited staffing and financial resources and geographical distance and isolation between agencies and those left behind can be overcome.

As recommended with a commitment to a trauma-informed response, service providers have an obligation to familiarise themselves with the role of others in the missing persons sector. With the advantage of improved communication and information exchange, coordination of services and better referral systems become possible. Information for service providers and others who come into contact with young people is available online, on youth-specific and other sites geared towards addressing the practical and emotional support needs of missing people and their families. These sites contain a wide range of information from state and nationally based services, from government and non-government sectors and agencies (see Appendix 7). Families, at a time when they continue to experience great stress, should not have to devote further time and energy themselves searching for such information.



## **Strengths and Limitations of the Present Investigation**

A significant strength of this study is the openness with which participants shared their individual stories with the researcher. A qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews allowed participants in Studies 1 and 2 to be de-identified and to speak openly and honestly about a difficult and emotionally evocative topic. Participants chose how much to disclose, and which details they preferred not to share. Each participant was invited to tell the story of their lived experience, a story that for most had not been told before. This was an empowering experience of recognition and validation for participants. The parents of young people had not previously had the opportunity to share their insights into the challenges of parenting a grieving child while taking care of their own grief. Similarly, the anonymity of an online survey questionnaire ensured respondents in Study 3 were able to write frankly and honestly.

Participants in Studies 1 and 2 and survey respondents in Study 3 self-selected into the study. Their participation was dependent on their availability within the ethics approval and interview period timeframes. The challenge of sharing such potentially difficult stories meant that some who had indicated their interest opted out of the study when the time for participation neared.

The results obtained cannot be generalised because the majority of participants identified that they or a member of their family had engaged in some way with a support service within the missing persons sector. All of the parents had previously accessed support for themselves or for their young person, which might suggest that they were better-informed and, therefore, better equipped to support the young people in their care. For these parents, and the service providers in Study 3, it might be suggested that they opted into the research because they recognised the presence, and need for inclusion, of young people and/or possessed some understanding of the dynamics and impact of ambiguous loss. For less engaged and possibly more isolated young people and parents, their stories may remain untold.

The use of both method and data source triangulation contributes strength to the methodology and richness to the data collected. Method triangulation was facilitated through the use of in-depth interviews in two studies and an online survey questionnaire in the third study for data collection. The different characteristics and demographics of participants in each study allowed for data source triangulation. Different ages and relationships to the missing person enabled the examination of the young people's experience from a range of perspectives so that, when combined, the data obtained was rich and complex. The responses from service providers offered collaboration and recognition of young people, thus extending the findings

of the in-depth interviews. Triangulating the findings across the various participant groups allows the unique perspectives of individuals involved in the study to be revealed and their voices heard (Conrad & Serlin, 2006; Wiersma & Jurs, 2009).

### **Implications for Theory, Research, and Practice**

The theoretical explorations relevant to this research study focused on trauma, grief, and loss, in particular ambiguous loss. When loss, such as the loss of a missing person, is ambiguous, the challenge for those who are left behind is to find a way of living with not knowing, and with an experience that is little understood and often unrecognised in the wider community.

This investigation has the potential to further inform theory, research, and practice in responding to the psychosocial support needs of young people, and potentially those of any age, when a loved one is a missing person. The results indicate that this study has made a valuable contribution to advancing theory and understanding of working with young people. In naming and demystifying the challenges associated with working with young people in uncharted territory, the investigation has significantly advanced practice knowledge.

Although these findings are significant, it is evident that there is much more work to be done. Further research into the lived experience and outcomes for those left behind, especially young people, will assist in demystifying missingness and can support the engagement of service providers across the missing persons sector. Research that evaluates and contributes to a better understanding of the outcomes of a range of interventions with young people will help ensure that supporting those left behind becomes everyone's business.

The need for further research in terms of policy development and its impact on service delivery at a systemic level is crucial. To enable the conduct of such research requires financial support, evidence that such work is professionally and politically valued. Further research is required to explore the effectiveness of meeting the goals stated by the various agencies in the missing persons sector, exploring the efficacy and outcomes of the range of services they deliver. These goals are variously stated by the different agencies and include raising awareness and educating the Australian community about the significant issue of missing people and about the need for ongoing practical, emotional and therapeutic support for families and friends dealing with the ambiguous loss of a missing person.

Research that examines the longer-term practice outcomes of timely referral and access to psychosocial support is yet to be undertaken and is warranted. These outcomes cannot be

quantified but can be explicated in terms of health and well-being outcomes for people of all ages, including young people accessing support services. This suggestion arises out of the different characteristics of the young people in Study 1. Because the participants in one group were young people under 20 years of age, and the others had been young people at the time their loved one went missing, the distinguishing feature was the length of time their loved one had been missing. For those whose loved ones had been missing longest, fewer established agencies in the missing persons sector at the time meant that they had accessed little or no psychosocial support at the time of their loved one going missing. The long-term costs of missingness, both financial and social, are deserving of further research. A better-informed understanding of the magnitude of these costs might providing compelling evidence of the need for well-funded support services.

This research has raised other questions, which have the potential to promote further research and influence practice. These include: How does the relationship established between service providers and families impact feelings of satisfaction, well-being and coping? How can a positive relationship between service providers and families of missing people be promoted and encouraged? Can a positive relationship between police and families of missing people mitigate the ongoing deleterious impacts of having a loved one who is a long-term missing person? Does a loved one going missing increase the likelihood of another person from the same family becoming a missing person? This last question is particularly relevant considered in the light of the fear parents and young people felt that if one family member could so easily become a missing person, there was no guarantee the same fate might not happen for another.

## **Conclusion**

Each young person who participated in this research brought their own unique experience of their loved one going missing, combined with personal and relational factors. Their relationships with their missing loved one and with family members and friends, and their experience of seeking and receiving support, combined to provide a full and rich insight into the lives of ten young people, and eight parents who were the carers of young people at the time their loved one went missing. All these factors dynamically influenced the successes and struggles they experienced when their loved one became a missing person.

This research has highlighted the experience of young people whose loved one is a long-term missing person, ensuring that their psychosocial support needs are acknowledged and responded to within their families, their communities, and in a wider societal context. Their

words resonate through the chapters and clearly show that for each of them their loved one's disappearance was, and remains, a most significant and impactful loss. Previously unshared stories provide insights into a world that changed irrevocably for each of them when their loved one became a missing person. Their world changed and they witnessed systemic and intergenerational impacts that continued years and decades later. Young people described similar and different experiences for themselves and within their families; however, uncertainty, ambiguity and unanswered question remained. Even when it was known that the missing person had died, ambiguity and questions persisted. Death did not bring resolution. Their questions changed over time and many remain unanswered as they continue to live with not knowing.

Young people intuitively understand who is able to be psychologically present and emotionally available for them, from within their family and community, their peers and service providers. Being 'seen' and 'heard' helped young people to feel recognised for the trauma their loved one's disappearance had caused; being supported by those who genuinely cared and were psychologically present helped to ease the intensity of the distress they felt in living with not knowing. Their wise words are a reminder for parents, adults and service providers of the importance of seeing and hearing young people. Despite their struggles, being allowed to be young people, being accepted, and included without judgement by the adults around them, remains important. They recognise their resilience and the strength they found in living their lives in the best way possible. The support sought and the support received differed across families and service providers. Those who were trauma-informed and who understood ambiguity were perceived to be psychologically present and better able to purposefully include young people.

The young people shared the stories presented in this thesis in the hope that other young people might be recognised, included, and supported should they find themselves living with not knowing. The telling of their stories was a positive, meaningful experience that furnished the opportunity to recognise and to honour their missing loved one. Young people came to recognise their strengths and their struggles with love, humour, sadness, and absolute humanity. These qualities are captured, finally, in the words of Eliza:

When I think of him, I can't help but smile. He was the funniest dude I've ever met, and that's the thing, I'd much rather have had him and his influence on me and my life, than not to have had him. I choose having him as long as I did.

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## **APPENDICES**

# Appendix 1

## Participant Information Letter



### PARTICIPANT INFORMATION LETTER

<b>PROJECT TITLE:</b>	<b>In the Loop: Identifying and responding to the psychosocial support needs of children and young people when a loved one is missing</b>
<b>PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:</b>	<b>Professor Janet MOONEY</b>
<b>STUDENT RESEARCHER:</b>	<b>Liz DAVIES</b>
<b>STUDENT'S DEGREE:</b>	<b>Doctor of Philosophy</b>

This interview forms part of a PhD research project that examines and seeks to better understand the experience of young people when someone they care about is a missing person. You have been invited to participate because you, or a parent or carer has identified that someone you care about is a missing person.

You are invited to attend participate in an interview. A trusted parent or carer is invited to accompany you during the interview. We would like to hear, in your own words, about your experience of your loved one going missing. This is important so that we can gain a better understanding of this experience for young people.

Your participation is very much appreciated. Your responses will be de-identified in the audio-recording and transcription process, which means you will remain anonymous in the published results.

#### ***Who is undertaking the project?***

This project is being conducted by Liz Davies, from Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit (FFMPU), Victims Services, NSW, and will form the basis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Australian Catholic University under the supervision of Professor Janet Mooney, Dr Anthony Dillon and Dr Fabri Blacklock. Liz Davies is an Accredited Mental Health Social Worker with more than 30 years' experience working with people of all ages who have experienced trauma and loss. For the past 5 years she has been employed as the Coordinator of FFMPU, a one-of-its-kind specialist counselling and support service for those affected by the loss of a missing person.

***Are there any risks associated with participating in this project?***

There are no foreseeable risks in participating in the project. A counsellor will be available immediately following the interview for you and/or your parent or carer, if you need to talk to someone about issues or concerns that might arise during the interview. You will **not** be asked to disclose any information other than that with which you are comfortable.

***What will I be asked to do?***

You will be asked to participate in a **60 - 90 minute** interview, which will be voice-recorded. The interview will take place at a mutually convenient and safe location, based on your availability and that of your parent or carer.

General questions will be used as prompts to begin the interview, to allow you to talk about your experience of your loved one going missing. The information you give me will be used to gain a better understanding of what happens for children and young people when a loved one is missing; how it affects young people; what happens for them in the family, community, at school; and about who supports them, where they access support and their experience of finding support. Most importantly it is about what the experience is like for young people.

***What are the benefits of the research project?***

This study is intended to give young people a voice about their experience of the loss of a missing person; to increase understanding of the psychosocial support needs of young people; and to increase understanding of the needs and challenges for parents and carers who are supporting young people; and to develop guidelines to improve the response to, and support for, young people and their families.

***Can I withdraw from the study?***

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You are not under any obligation to participate. If you agree to participate, you can withdraw from the study at any time without adverse consequences. Should participants choose to withdraw; any data collected prior to withdrawal will be disposed of in accordance with Victims Services, Department of Justice data requirements. Audio recordings will be erased, and any transcribed data will be shredded and disposed of in confidential waste.

***Will anyone else know the results of the project?***

The results of the study will be published in the form of a thesis, and may be summarised and appear in publications or be provided to other researchers in a form that does not identify the participants in any way. No-one will be identified at any stage of the study and your full rights to privacy and confidentiality will be maintained.

***Will I be able to find out the results of the project?***

A summary of the findings will be made available at the completion of the project. Please send an email to [elizabeth.davies@myacu.edu.au](mailto:elizabeth.davies@myacu.edu.au) if you would like to receive a summary of the findings.

***Who do I contact if I have questions about the project?***

If you have any questions about the study you can contact the Principal Investigator or the Student Researcher whose details are recorded below.

Professor Janet Mooney  
Principal Investigator  
Institute for Positive Psychology and Education,  
Australian Catholic University

Liz Davies,  
Families and Friends of Missing Persons  
Unit, Victims Services,  
Department of Justice

02 9701 4670 or  
[Janet.Mooney@acu.edu.au](mailto:Janet.Mooney@acu.edu.au)

(02) 8688 8186 or  
[elizabeth.davies@myacu.edu.au](mailto:elizabeth.davies@myacu.edu.au)

***What if I have a complaint or any concerns?***

The study has been reviewed by the Human Research Ethics Committee at Australian Catholic University (register number 2015-190H). If you have any complaints or concerns about the conduct of the project, you may write to the Manager of the Human Research Ethics Committee care of the Office of the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Research).

Manager, Ethics  
c/o Office of the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Research)  
Australian Catholic University  
North Sydney Campus  
PO Box 968  
NORTH SYDNEY, NSW 2059  
Ph.: 02 9739 2519  
Fax: 02 9739 2870  
Email: [resethics.manager@acu.edu.au](mailto:resethics.manager@acu.edu.au)

Any complaint or concern will be treated in confidence and fully investigated. You will be informed of the outcome.

***I want to participate! How do I sign up?***

If you are interested in participating in this research, please let us know by email [elizabeth.davies@myacu.edu.au](mailto:elizabeth.davies@myacu.edu.au). We will contact you to arrange a suitable time for the interview to take place.

Before we can proceed with the interview, please return the signed and witnessed consent form (see attached). You can return it as an attachment by email to [elizabeth.davies@myacu.edu.au](mailto:elizabeth.davies@myacu.edu.au) if or post it to:

Liz Davies  
Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit  
Locked Bag 5118  
PARRAMATTA NSW 2124

## Appendix 2

### Interview schedule for young people participants, and adults who were under 20 years at the time their loved one went missing

#### 1. Introduction

I would like to hear about your experience of (name of missing person) going missing. The information you give me will be used to gain a better understanding of what happens for children and young people when a loved one is missing; how it affects young people; what happens for them in the family, community, at school; and about who supports them, where they access support and their experience of finding support. Most importantly it is about what the experience is like for young people.

#### 2. Background

- 2.1 Can you please tell me your name, age, and who you live with?
- 2.2 How is (name of mp) related to you?
  - 2.3 How old were you when (mp) went missing and how long have they been missing now?
- 2.4 Did you live with (mp) before they went missing? (If no- Where did they live? How often did you see them or talk to them?)

#### 3. The telling

- 3.1 How did you find out that (mp) was missing?
- 3.2 Who told you?
- 3.3 What words did that person(s) use to tell you?
- 3.4 How soon after (mp) went missing were you told?
- 3.5 How did you find out what was happening in the search and with the rest of the family?
- 3.6 Did you have any contact with police or other missing persons' organisations when (mp) was first missing?
- 3.7 Can you tell me more about what that time was like for you and the people in your family? What did you notice was happening in the family?

#### 4. The impact

- 4.1 What were your feelings when you learnt that (mp) was missing?
- 4.2 Did you notice anything different about you after (mp) went missing?
- 4.3 What do you think others might have noticed about you since (mp) went missing?

- 4.4 What did it mean for you when (mp) went missing?
- 4.5 Did you notice a change in your family after (mp) went missing? Can you describe what you saw or felt was happening?
- 4.6 How did the family and your friends respond to you when they learned that (mp) was missing?
- 4.7 What happened/what was your experience of telling people outside of your family? How did they respond to you?
- 4.8 Were there some people you did not tell? Why was this so?
- 4.9 Was there someone in your family or outside of it that you talked to about what was happening when (mp) was first missing? Is there someone you talk to now?
- 4.10 What have you learned about yourself and about those around you through the experience of (mp) being missing?
- 4.11 Did your support come from inside or outside of the family?



## Appendix 3

### Interview schedule for parents/caregivers

#### 1. Introduction:

I would like to hear about your experience of having a missing loved one and being the parent/carer of a young person affected by missing. The information you give me will be used to gain a better understanding of what happens for young people when a loved one is missing; how it affects them; what happens for them in the family, community, at school; and what happens for those who support them. I also want to hear about your experience of providing support.

#### 2. Background

- 2.1. Please tell me your name and who resides with you?
- 2.2. How is the (name of missing person - mp) related to you?
- 2.3. How long has (mp) been missing now?
- 2.4. Did you live with (mp) before they went missing? (If no- Where did they live? How often did you see them or talk to them?)
- 2.5. Some people have suggested that children shouldn't be told, until the facts are known. What are your thoughts about this?
- 2.6. Who first became aware that mp was missing?
- 2.7. How soon after (mp) went missing did you tell (name of young person - yp)?
- 2.8. Do you remember how you told him/her?
- 2.9. What were your concerns about telling (yp)??
- 2.10. Did you speak with anyone else in the family or outside of the family about what you would say to (yp)?
- 2.11. Did you notice anything different about (yp) after (mp) went missing?
- 2.12. How did yp respond when they learned that (mp) was missing?
- 2.13. What happened/what was your experience of telling yp?
- 2.14. Was there information you left out when you told yp and others that (mp) was missing? Why was this so?
- 2.15. Was there someone in your family or outside of it that you talked to about what was happening when mp was first missing? Is there someone you talk to now?

## Appendix 4

### Qualtrics survey questionnaire

#### **Responding to the support needs of young people, and their parents and carers, when a loved one is missing.**

This survey forms part of a PhD research project that examines and seeks to better understand the experience of young people when someone they care about is a missing person. You have received this survey because a young person or their parent has identified you as a service provider they have come into contact with since their loved one went missing; or because you work for an organisation/agency that may come into contact with adults and/or young people who have experienced a loved one going missing.

Your responses are appreciated. You may remain anonymous.

1. Where do you work?

- Government search agency
- Non-government search agency
- Health
- Community sector
- Education
- Other.....

2. What is your title and your professional background?

.....

3. In the course of your work, have you had contact with the families of missing people?

- Yes
- No

If yes, who was your contact within the family?

.....

4. Do you know what support is being received by other family members?

- Yes
- No

If yes, who is supporting these members of the family?

.....

5. Did you ask the contact person about their own and other members of the family's support needs?

- Yes
- No

If yes, what did they tell you?

.....  
.....

If no, is there a reason you did not ask?

.....  
.....  
.....

6. If there were young people (20 years or younger) who identified as a part of the family unit, did you obtain any information about them?

.....  
.....  
.....

7. Do you believe young people need support when someone in the family is missing? Why/why not?

.....  
.....  
.....

8. In your opinion, whose responsibility is it to ensure young people are offered support when a loved one is missing?

.....  
.....  
.....

9. Are there any other comments you wish to add?

## Appendix 5

### Parent Guardian Consent Form



#### PARENT/GUARDIAN CONSENT FORM

TITLE OF PROJECT: In the Loop: Identifying and responding to the psychosocial support needs of young people when a loved one is missing

(NAME OF) PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR (or SUPERVISOR): Professor Janet Mooney

(NAME OF) STUDENT RESEARCHER: Elizabeth (Liz) Davies  
.....

I ..... (*the parent/guardian*) have read (*or, where appropriate, have had read to me*) and understood the information provided in the Letter to the Participants. Any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree that my child, nominated below, may participate in this audiotaped face-to-face interview of approximately 90 minutes duration, realising that I can withdraw my consent at any time without affecting my future relationship with the researchers or the FFMPU team.

I agree that research data collected for the study may be published or may be provided to other researchers in a form that does not identify my child or the family in any way.

NAME OF PARENT/GUARDIAN: .....

SIGNATURE: ..... DATE:.....

NAME OF YOUNG PERSON .....

SIGNATURE OF PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR (or SUPERVISOR): .....

DATE: .....

SIGNATURE OF STUDENT RESEARCHER (if applicable): .....

DATE: .....

#### ASSENT OF PARTICIPANTS AGED UNDER 20 YEARS

I ..... (*the participant aged under 20 years*) understand what this research project is designed to explore. What I will be asked to do has been explained to me. I agree to take part in an audiotaped face-to-face interview of approximately 90 minutes, realising that I can withdraw at any time without having to give a reason for my decision.

NAME OF PARTICIPANT AGED UNDER 20: .....

SIGNATURE: .....DATE:

SIGNATURE OF PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR (or SUPERVISOR): .....  
DATE:

SIGNATURE OF STUDENT RESEARCHER (if applicable): .....  
DATE:

## Appendix 6

### Themes – Coding/Threads

THEMES	CODING/THREADS
<b>LIVING WITH NOT KNOWING</b>	<p><b>Response to the loved one going missing</b>            From family members, especially parents            Understanding ambiguous loss – differences</p> <p><b>Impact on young person</b>            The young person’s perception of the practical and emotional impacts on self.            Includes trauma, grief and loss            The parent’s perception of the practical and emotional impacts on the young person            Recognising that some impacts changed over time</p> <p><b>Impact on the family</b>            How the young person experienced this – observations</p> <p><b>Response of peers</b>            Impact            How the young person experienced this - observations</p>
<b>A GROWING AWARENESS</b>	<p><b>Learning</b>            Making meaning            Mental health            The person I am today            Dialectical thinking</p>
<b>RECOGNISING YOUNG PEOPLE</b>	<p><b>Inclusion/Exclusion</b>            Informing young people            Learning about being missing            Ensuring they were part of the family unit            The young person’s observations, parent’s observations, service providers observations, beliefs about inclusion and exclusion in what followed.            Difficulties for parents</p> <p><b>Systems Issues</b>            The police investigation            Other service providers</p>
<b>SUPPORT</b>	<p><b>Responding to young people</b>            Accidental            Unexpected            Disappointments            Grief            Informal            Formal</p>

## Appendix 7

### Agency & Referral Information

**1. The National Missing Persons Coordination Centre**

<https://www.missingpersons.gov.au>

The National Missing Persons Coordination Centre is funded by the Federal Government through the AFP. Its mission is to reduce the incidence and impact of missing persons and to educate the Australian community about this significant issue.

**2. Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit (FFMPU)**

<https://www.missingpersons.justice.nsw.gov.au>

FFMPU provides counselling and support from trained professionals to families and friends of missing people. FFMPU is part of the NSW Department of Communities and Justice. FFMPU has published a guide for family members and friends and a booklet specifically for young people living with the loss of a missing loved one - In the Loop (2016) Retrieved from

[https://www.missingpersons.justice.nsw.gov.au/Documents/book\\_in-the-loop.pdf](https://www.missingpersons.justice.nsw.gov.au/Documents/book_in-the-loop.pdf)

**4. NSW Police Missing Persons Registry (formerly NSW Police Missing Persons Unit)**

[https://www.police.nsw.gov.au/can\\_you\\_help\\_us/missing\\_persons](https://www.police.nsw.gov.au/can_you_help_us/missing_persons)

Oversees every missing persons report in NSW, and the unidentified bodies and human remains. The MPR is made up of a team of detectives and analysts. It does not usually investigate missing persons, instead it reviews each report and provides a supportive role to the police in the field

**5. Australian Red Cross**

<https://www.redcross.org.au/get-help/help-for-migrants-in-transition/tracing-and-restoring-family-links>

Part of the global Restoring Family Links Network that aims to re-establish family contact between family members separated internationally as a result of conflict, disaster or migration.

**6. Missing Persons Advocacy Network (MPAN)**

<https://mpan.com.au>

MPAN humanises and creates awareness for missing people, as well as providing practical support to families and friends through an online guide of what to do when someone goes missing. MPAN works to establish partnerships that increase visibility for the issue and lessen the financial impact on those left behind.

**7. Leave a Light On – Adelaide**

[Leave a Light On](#)

The aim of the charity is to raise awareness of missing persons cold cases in Australia by working alongside other missing persons organisations. The charity aims to promote long-term cases and raise awareness of the need for ongoing support for families and friends dealing with the ambiguous loss of a missing person.

**8. Australian Missing Persons Register (AMPR)**

<http://www.australianmissingpersonsregister.com>

AMPR aims to provide information about missing persons from every State and Territory in Australia, no matter how long they have been missing, to find these people, and provide answers for their families. Emotional support and practical help and advice wherever possible is offered to the friends and families of missing people.

**9. Beyond Blue**

[www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)

Chat and email online through their website

**10. SANE Australia**

[www.sane.org](http://www.sane.org)

**11. Lifeline**

[www.lifeline.org.au](http://www.lifeline.org.au)

**12. Suicide Call Back – Service**

[www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au](http://www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au)

Family members wishing to connect with other families for practical and emotional support



## Appendix 8

### Ethics Register

From: Ms Pratigya Pozniak <[pratigya.pozniak@acu.edu.au](mailto:pratigya.pozniak@acu.edu.au)>  
Sent: Tuesday, 29 August 2017 11:59 AM  
To: Janet Mooney <[Janet.Mooney@acu.edu.au](mailto:Janet.Mooney@acu.edu.au)>; Elizabeth Davies <[elizabeth.davies@myacu.edu.au](mailto:elizabeth.davies@myacu.edu.au)>  
Cc: Pratigya Pozniak <[Pratigya.Pozniak@acu.edu.au](mailto:Pratigya.Pozniak@acu.edu.au)>  
Subject: 2015-190H Final Report Approved

Dear Janet,

Ethics Register Number : 2015-190H  
Project Title : In the Loop: Identifying and responding to the psychosocial support needs of children and young people when a loved one is missing

Thank you for returning the Final Ethics Report for your project.

The Deputy Chair of the Human Research Ethics Committee has signed off on this project as completed. It has now been recorded on the Ethics Register as COMPLETED AND CLOSED.

We wish you well in future research projects.

Kind regards,  
Ms Pratigya Pozniak

Research Ethics Officer | Office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research) Australian Catholic University  
T: 02 9739 2646 E: [res.ethics@acu.edu.au](mailto:res.ethics@acu.edu.au)