



# Repeat missing child reports: Prevalence, timing, and risk factors

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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** There are around 200,000 reports of missing children each year in England and Wales, and around 65 per cent of these relate to repeat disappearances. Such repeat disappearances are a social care and policing concern due to the multiple risks that children are exposed to while they are missing from home, including exploitation, substance misuse, and violence. Understanding the characteristics of children who go missing repeatedly could help services protect them and meet their needs more effectively.

**Design/methodology/approach:** This study uses police records to explore the characteristics of missing children (<18 years) from one Welsh local authority over a five-year period, and the prevalence, timing, and risk factors associated with repeat missing incidents.

**Findings:** There were 1,434 children reported missing and 4,922 missing episodes in the city between 2014 and 2019. Thirty-nine per cent of children were reported missing more than once, and these children accounted for 82 per cent of all missing child reports. Logistic regression found that children who were White and living in residential care were more likely to be reported missing repeatedly. Over half (57 per cent) of the children who were reported as missing more than once were reported missing for a second time within two months of the first incident.

**Originality:** This study highlights the volume and quick succession of repeat missing child reports. It provides evidence about some of the risk factors associated with repeat missing episodes.

## 1. Introduction

In England and Wales, there are approximately 200,000 reports of missing children each year and around 65 per cent of these relate to repeat disappearances (UK Missing Persons Unit, 2021). The volume of repeat disappearances is a problem for the police, social services, and the children themselves. Children who often go missing risk becoming detached from their home and school life (Biehal and Wade, 2000). They are also at risk of involvement in crime, particularly assaults, grievous bodily harm, and "survival crimes" such as shoplifting and theft (Shalev, 2011). Practitioners are advised that repeat disappearances may increase a child's risk of exploitation or be a sign that they are already being exploited (College of Policing, 2020a; Jago et al., 2011). Frequent missing episodes are also associated with adverse experiences later in life including substance misuse (Windle, 1989) and homelessness (Brakenhoff et al., 2015).

The number of children who are reported missing repeatedly to the police puts pressure on services. The police and social services are

responsible for agreeing a plan on how to respond to missing children, completing safe and well checks and return home interviews, sharing information, case planning, and organising support for children and their families (Department for Education, 2014). Social services have further responsibilities to protect children in care (Department for Education, 2014). These include developing a care plan to promote the welfare of the child and reduce the risk of missing episodes. Children in care are more likely to be reported missing repeatedly than their peers. On average, children in care who are reported missing in the UK have 6 missing incidents per year while children not in care have 2.6 missing incidents per year (Baker and Hunter, 2018). This is likely to be due to a range of factors including difficult relationships with staff and peers, wanting to see family and friends, a lack of freedom, and frequent placement moves (Biehal and Wade 2000; Taylor et al., 2014). Staff and carers may also have a lower threshold for reporting children in care as missing and do so regularly as they follow protocols and care plans (Newiss, 1999). It is possible that social services may become involved with children who are not in care as repeat disappearances may signal

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that a child is beyond parental control and therefore, require social work involvement (Children Act, 1989).

Social care and police staff have reported feeling frustrated when responding to children who have been reported missing on multiple occasions (Newiss, 1999; Shalev-Greene and Hayden, 2014). Some staff perceive children who are reported missing repeatedly to be “troublesome” or “problematic” (Colvin et al., 2018; Ofsted, 2013). Children have reported feeling unhappy with how carers and the police have responded when they have been missing (Beckett et al., 2015; Taylor et al., 2014). They often felt punished or blamed for going missing and desired a more empathic, non-judgemental response.

The All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults conducted inquiries in 2012, 2016, and 2019, and found that missing children, especially those living in care and out-of-area placements, need to be better protected and supported (APPG 2012, 2016, 2019). The 2012 inquiry highlighted that the police response to repeat missing incidents was inconsistent and professionals can overlook children’s vulnerability and perceive them to be “street-wise” (APPG, 2012). Inspections of social services and the police have also found that more work needs to be done to improve the response to missing children (Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC), 2016; Ofsted, 2013) and to find solutions for children who are reported missing repeatedly (HMIC, 2016).

This paper seeks to develop our understanding of children who are reported missing repeatedly and the duration and timing of these incidents. We provide an overview of the literature on the factors that are associated with missing episodes generally and those specifically associated with repeat disappearances. We then present our analysis of police missing child reports in one local authority, focusing on the children who were reported missing repeatedly in a five-year period.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Characteristics associated with missing episodes

There is a wealth of literature in relation to children going missing and the factors that are associated with missing episodes. Several studies have found that children are more likely to go missing when they are aged 13–15, female, and living in a single-parent household (Rees and Lee, 2005; Sanchez et al., 2006; Smeaton and Rees, 2004). The evidence is mixed on whether ethnicity is associated with a child’s risk of going missing. Some studies suggest that being from an ethnic minority group is a risk factor for missing episodes (Huey et al., 2019; Pergamit, 2010), while others find that it is a protective factor (McGarvey et al., 2010; Tyler and Bersani, 2008).

There is considerable evidence to suggest that children who go missing have experienced high levels of family conflict, abuse, poor mental health, and problems at school (Benoit-Bryan, 2011; de Man, 2000; Glowacz et al., 2020; Meltzer et al., 2012; Rees, 2011; Tucker et al., 2011; Tyler and Bersani, 2008). Cross-sectional studies have not been able to conclude whether these factors are a cause or consequence of going missing. For example, Meltzer et al. (2012) acknowledged that abuse may be a risk factor for going missing, and a risk associated with being away from home. Longitudinal studies have furthered our understanding by demonstrating the predictive relationship between family, health and school related factors and future missing episodes (e.g., Tucker et al., 2011; Tyler and Bersani, 2008). Factors such as abuse and family conflict are described as “push” factors as they can motivate a child to leave a situation (Biehal and Wade, 2000), whereas “pull” factors can encourage a child towards a situation. These include going missing as a means of seeking independence and seeing family, friends, or a boyfriend or girlfriend (Finkelstein et al., 2004). Children may also go missing if they are being exploited and experience pull factors such as affection, gifts, or status (Sturrock and Holmes, 2015).

Children in care are over-represented in missing person reports. In the UK, less than one per cent of children are in care and yet around 30

per cent of missing child reports originate with this group (Hayden and Goodship, 2015). Children in care appear to be at heightened risk of missing incidents due to a complex set of factors. These relate to the difficult circumstances that children in care have experienced and the care environment. Before entering care, many children will have experienced abuse or neglect and may run away as a way of coping (Karam and Robert, 2013). The care environment itself may be a risk factor for going missing. Biehal and Wade (2000) surveyed 32 residential homes in England and found that between 25 per cent and 71 per cent of children had gone missing at least once. The culture of the home was found to play a key part. Homes with a high percentage of children who had been missing were identified as having low staff morale and a lack of clear leadership. Children have reported running away from residential care due to bullying, unsupportive staff, and feeling that the rules are unnecessarily strict (Attar-Schwartz, 2013; Biehal and Wade, 2000). The timing and stability of care placements can also influence a child’s risk of going missing. Children are more likely to go missing at the start of a placement, when they have experienced multiple placements (Courtney and Zinn, 2009), and when there is no clear permanency plan (Nesmith, 2006).

### 2.2. Characteristics associated with repeat missing episodes

Three key studies have analysed police records of repeat missing child reports in the UK. First, Babuta and Sidebottom (2018) reviewed 29 months of data from one rural police force in England. They found that 42 per cent of children had been reported missing more than once. Regression analysis identified that repeat incidents were associated with being a teenager, living in out-of-home care, experiencing family conflict, and the call handler not considering the incident to be ‘out of character’. The authors also explored the duration of missing incidents and distance travelled. Children who were reported missing repeatedly stayed away from home for a similar length of time as children reported missing only once (2.5 days on average), but tended to travel shorter distances. The authors suggest that children who go missing once may be motivated to travel to a specific location whereas children who go missing regularly may be avoiding the home environment.

Next, Sidebottom et al. (2019) investigated the missing child reports recorded by one urban police force over a one-year period. The authors compared children who were reported missing once to those who were reported missing between two and nine times and those reported missing 10 times or more. Children in the latter category were more likely to be a teenager, living in care and misusing substances compared to children who were only reported missing once. Sidebottom et al. (2019) also analysed the timing of missing episodes and found that repeat missing reports typically occurred within four weeks of the initial disappearance.

Finally, Hutchings et al. (2019) analysed one year’s worth of data from a Missing Children’s Team in Wales, including information from the police, health, and social services. Five variables were found to be predictive of going missing more than once: (1) out-of-home care, (2) a history of abuse and neglect, (3) being known to the youth offending team, (4) a history of child sexual exploitation (CSE), and (5) substance misuse.

These three studies have begun to identify similar risk factors associated with repeat missing child reports, albeit generally they have considered timeframes of one to two years only. Several authors have called for longer periods to be used to further explore the repetitive nature of missing child reports (Hutchings et al., 2019; Sanchez et al., 2006; Thompson and Pillai, 2006). The current study aims to help meet this call by using a data set that covers a five-year period to explore the recidivism of missing child reports and the length of time that elapsed between repeat reports. The study addresses the following specific questions:

1. How many children are repeatedly reported missing (i.e., on two or more occasions)?
2. How much time elapses between repeat missing child reports?
3. How long are children missing for, and is this different for children who are reported missing once compared with children who are reported missing repeatedly?
4. What demographic and social factors are associated with repeat missing child reports?

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Data

Police data was collected for all children reported missing to the police in one Welsh local authority between 1st April 2014 and 31st March 2019 (inclusive). The local authority covers a large, urban area. Residents are predominately White (UK Government, 2018) and a fifth of residents are aged 0–17 (Office for National Statistics, 2020). Around a third of children are living in poverty (End Child Poverty, 2019). The rate of children in care is higher than the average in Wales (Hodges and Bristow, 2019).

The data set included children aged 0–17. A decision was made to include everyone under the age of 18 as this aligns with recent studies of repeat missing child reports (Babuta and Sidebottom, 2018; Sidebottom et al., 2019). The data set included a unique ID number for each child, the children's demographics, and details of their missing incidents. The demographic variables covered: age when reported missing, sex, and ethnicity. Details of the missing incidents included: date reported missing, date and time last seen, date and time returned, and concern for CSE. A notification for CSE is added to police records when a child is believed to be at-risk for this particular form of abuse. CSE is defined by the College of Policing (2020b) as:

a form of child abuse. It occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into sexual activity (a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or (b) for the financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator.

Before the data set was provided to the researcher, a police analyst computed an additional variable to note whether children were living at a residential children's home or not. The child's address was used to determine if this was the case. The addresses were removed by the analyst and an anonymised version of the data set was provided to the researcher.

A small number of duplicate cases were removed from the data set before analysis (e.g., when a child had multiple missing reports with the same last seen date and time). Additional variables were computed using the child's ID and added to the data set as follows - the number of missing person reports per child, whether children had been reported missing more than once, and the number of days between each missing person report. Ethical approval for the study was provided by the School of Social Sciences at Cardiff University.

#### 3.2. Analysis

The analysis of the data was completed using SPSS Version 25. Descriptive statistics were used to examine the characteristics of children reported missing, the prevalence of repeat reports, the duration of missing incidents, and the length of time that elapsed between repeat reports. When calculating the length of time that passed between repeat reports, the first year of the data (1st April 2014- 31st March 2015) was treated as the 'target' year and the subsequent four years as the 'follow-up' (1st April 2015- 31st March 2019). Children reported missing during the 'target' year were included in the analysis. For each child, four years

after the date of their first missing person report was calculated and any additional missing person reports in this period were included. Any subsequent reports were excluded. This ensured that there was a consistent follow-up period for the sample.

We compared the characteristics of children who were reported missing once to the characteristics of children who were reported missing on multiple occasions using Chi-square statistics. Logistic regression was then used to examine if any of the characteristics were predictive of children being reported missing repeatedly or not. Other types of regression, such as linear regression, were not suitable as a dichotomous dependent variable was used. The dependent variable was whether children had been reported missing once (coded as 0) or on multiple occasions (coded as 1) during the study period. The independent variables were binary: sex (0 = male, 1 = female), age (0 = 1–12 years, 1 = 13–17 years), ethnicity (0 = other, 1 = white), living residential care (0 = no, 1 = yes), and CSE concern (0 = no, 1 = yes). Age was coded as 0–12 and 13–17 because teenager years have been previously identified as a risk factor for repeat missing incidents (Babuta and Sidebottom, 2018; Hutchings et al., 2019; Sidebottom et al., 2019). A binary option for ethnicity was used because most children in the sample were White (82 per cent), and there were small numbers of children in the other ethnic groups.

Independent variables were added to the model if they were identified as having a significant relationship with repeat missing child reports in the Chi-square analysis. Nested models were used to explore how the effect of the independent variables changed as other independent variables were added. Multicollinearity was checked using variance inflation factors. All values were around one ( $M = 1.0$ ) indicating no potential problems. The influence of outliers in the final model was assessed using Cook's distance. The values were below the commonly used threshold of one, indicating that there was no substantial influence of outliers. The goodness-of-fit was assessed using the Hosmer-Lemeshow statistic.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Demographics of children reported missing

There were 4,922 missing child reports that were made in relation to 1,434 individual children. Table 1 provides a summary of the children's characteristics. The child's sex was recorded for nearly all the sample (99.7 per cent). There was a similar proportion of males (53 per cent) and females (47 per cent). Ethnicity was recorded for 75 per cent of children. Where available, 82 per cent of children were reported to be White. This proportion is consistent with the demographics of the local authority where around 85 per cent of the residents are White (UK

**Table 1**  
Characteristics of children reported missing.

	<i>n</i>	% <sup>a</sup>
<b>Sex</b>		
Male	756	53
Female	674	47
<b>Ethnicity</b>		
White	882	82
Other	191	18
<b>Age</b>		
0–12	315	22
13–17	1119	78
<b>CSE concern</b>		
Yes	48	3
No	1386	97
<b>Residential care</b>		
Yes	70	5
No	1364	95

<sup>a</sup> Percentage is adjusted for missing data (missing data: sex  $n = 4$ ; ethnicity  $n = 361$ ; age  $n = 0$ ; CSE concern  $n = 0$ ; residential care  $n = 0$ ).

Government, 2018). Most children were aged 13 to 17 at the time of their first missing person report (78 per cent). A small minority of children had a notification for CSE concern (3 per cent) or were known to be living in residential care at the time of their first missing person report (5 per cent).

#### 4.2. Prevalence of repeat missing reports

Most children were reported missing once (61 per cent,  $n = 872$ ; Fig. 1). Around a third of children (32 per cent;  $n = 455$ ) were reported missing two to nine times, and 7 per cent ( $n = 107$ ) were reported missing 10 times or more (categories used by Sidebottom et al., 2019). Children who were reported missing repeatedly accounted for over 4,000 of the missing person reports ( $n = 4,050$ ; 82 per cent). Children with 10 or more reports accounted for almost half of all reports (48 per cent;  $n = 2,352$ ).

#### 4.3. Temporal pattern of repeat missing reports

Next, we examined the length of time that elapsed between repeat reports. Out of the 372 children reported missing between April 2014 and March 2015, 173 (47 per cent) were reported missing for a second time in the four years after their first missing person report. Fig. 2 shows the length of time that passed between the children’s first and second missing person reports. Over a third (39 per cent;  $n = 68$ ) of children were reported missing for a second time within one month of their first report. A further 18 per cent ( $n = 31$ ) of children were reported missing between one and two months afterwards. After that time, there was a considerable drop in the number of children experiencing repeat reports.

The time between successive reports was also examined (Table 2). These figures are presented separately for children who were living in residential care and children who were not. This is due the heterogeneity of risk. Children in care are consistently reported to be at high risk of repeat missing person reports (Babuta and Sidebottom, 2018; Hutchings et al., 2019; Sidebottom et al., 2019). If the analysis was completed for high and low risk groups simultaneously, it is likely that the results would reflect the temporal pattern experienced by the high-risk group only (Sidebottom et al., 2019). The median scores suggest that children in residential care were reported missing for a second time at a quicker rate (median = 37 days) than children who were not in residential care (median = 66 days). The time intervals decreased for both groups after the third report, with a median of less than three weeks between reports.

#### 4.4. Length of missing episodes

We were able to calculate the length of missing incidents for 89 per cent of reports ( $n = 4,365$ ). Where known, almost all reports (90 per cent;  $n = 3,929$ ) involved children being located within 48 h of the date and time that they were last seen. A small proportion of reports (8 per cent;  $n = 370$ ) were made regarding children who were missing for two to seven days. Two per cent ( $n = 66$ ) of reports were open for longer than a week. There was no significant difference in the average length of the first missing incident for children who had been reported missing once ( $n = 746$ ;  $M = 49.21$  h;  $SD = 446.43$ ) and children who had been reported missing repeatedly ( $n = 467$ ;  $M = 19.16$  h;  $SD = 30.14$ ;  $U = 179428.50$ ,  $p = 0.34$ ).

#### 4.5. Characteristics associated with repeat missing reports

Table 3 compares the characteristics of children who were reported missing repeatedly with children who were reported missing once. Children who were reported missing repeatedly were more likely to be White, aged 13–17, living in residential care, and have a notification for CSE concern. There was no association between sex and repeat missing child reports. Males and females appeared to be at a similar risk of repeat reports (38 per cent and 41 per cent respectively).

Table 4 presents the results from the logistic regression analysis. The final model (model four) shows that ethnicity and residential care status were significantly associated with repeat reports, when controlling for age and CSE concern. In particular, the odds of being reported missing repeatedly were 1.77 higher for White children compared to those from other ethnic groups. The odds were 3.70 higher for children in residential care compared to their peers. Being a teenager initially influenced the likelihood of children experiencing repeat reports (model one), but it was no longer significant when controlling for ethnicity (model two). There was no significant relationship between CSE concern and repeat disappearances. The final model explains four per cent of the variance in repeat missing person reports. The Hosmer-Lemeshow statistic indicated that the model was a good fit ( $p = 0.94$ ).

### 5. Discussion

This study examined the prevalence of repeat missing child reports, the characteristics associated with repeat reports, and the timing of missing episodes. The results show that around 40 per cent of children in the sample were reported missing more than once during the study

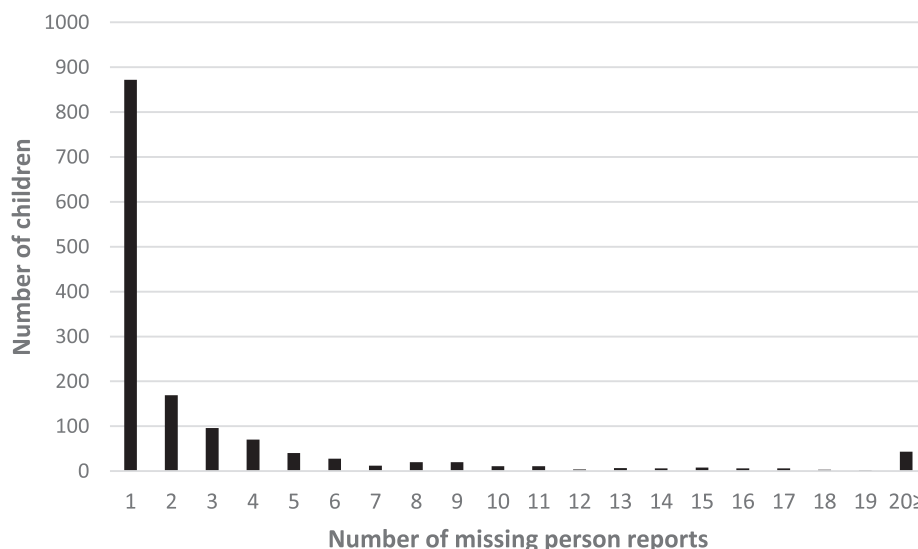


Fig. 1. Number of missing person reports per child (N = 1,434).

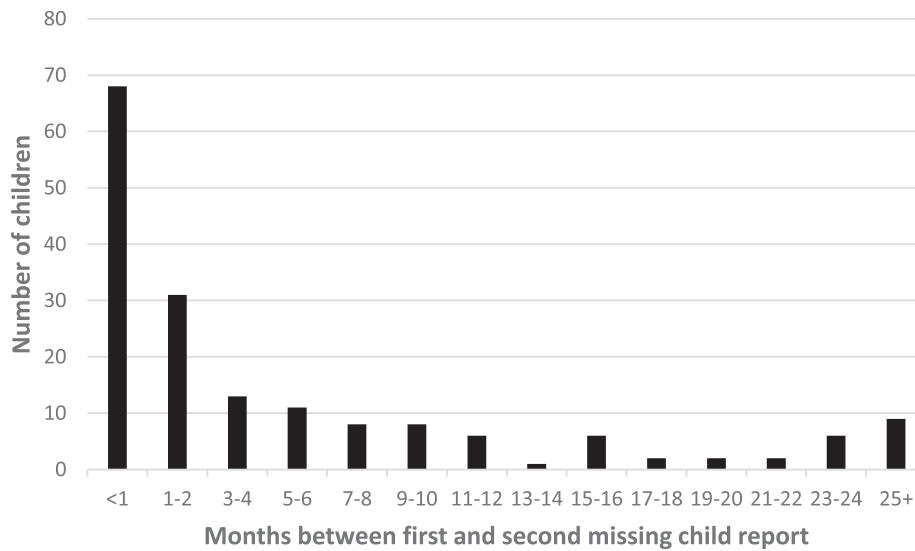


Fig. 2. Months between first and second missing child report (n = 173).

Table 2  
Median number of days between successive missing child reports.

Missing child reports	All children		Children in residential care		Children not in residential care	
	Median # days	n	Median # days	n	Median # days	n
1st – 2nd	65	173	37	15	66	158
2nd – 3rd	25	123	20	15	25	109
3rd – 4th	14	103	14	13	15	90
4th – 5th	13	80	10	12	14	68
5th – 6th	16	69	8	11	17	58
6th – 7th	7	58	10	10	6	48
7th – 8th	11	52	11	9	12	44
8th – 9th	12	50	5	9	16	41
9th – 10th	9	42	13	8	9	34

period. Children who were reported missing repeatedly were more likely to be White and living in residential care. While it is important to note that living in out-of-home care may not be the cause of missing incidents, nonetheless in this study and in previous research it has been identified repeatedly as a risk factor for repeat missing person reports (Babuta and Sidebottom, 2018; Hutchings et al., 2019; Sidebottom et al., 2019; Thompson and Pillai, 2006; Thompson and Pollio, 2006). The heightened risk of repeat missing incidents for children in residential care is likely due to a range of factors including historical, individual, and placement-related factors (Rees et al., 2002). Furthermore, in recent

years, children have been increasingly placed in residential homes further away from their family (Foster, 2020). This may have contributed to the number of missing incidents as those children seek to visit their family and friends (APPG, 2019).

The second predictor of repeat reports was ethnicity, with White children more likely to go missing more than once. Several previous studies have reported no relationship between ethnicity and repeat disappearances (Baker et al., 2003; Pergamit, 2010; Sidebottom et al., 2019). However, a few studies have identified a similar relationship to that found in this study (McGarvey et al., 2010; Rees and Lee, 2005; Tyler and Bersani, 2008). For instance, Tyler and Bersani (2008) analysed three waves of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth in the US and found that African American and Hispanic children were less likely to go missing than White children, despite experiencing greater environmental risks and lower socioeconomic status. The reasons behind this relationship were unclear. Tyler and Bersani (2008) proposed that African American and Hispanic children may experience more protective factors (e.g., a strong community network) that help reduce the likelihood of them going missing. Alternatively, ethnic differences in this study could be explained by different reporting practices to the police. For example, there is evidence to suggest that White adults have more voluntary contact with the police (Clancy et al., 2001) and greater confidence in their ability to help than adults from other ethnic groups (Tyler, 2005).

We also found that there was a quick succession of repeat reports. Over half (57 per cent) of children were reported missing again within

Table 3  
Characteristics of children who were reported missing once or on multiple occasions.

Characteristics	Categories	n	Single missing person report n (%)	Repeat missing person report n (%)	OR	χ <sup>2</sup>	p
Sex	Male	756	469 (62)	287 (38)	(ref)	1.08	0.30
	Female	674	400 (59)	274 (41)	1.12		
Age	0–12 years	315	218 (69)	97 (31)	(ref)	11.94	0.00**
	13–17 years	1119	654 (58)	465 (42)	1.60		
Ethnicity	Other	191	125 (65)	66 (35)	(ref)	10.45	0.00**
	White	882	464 (53)	418 (47)	1.71		
Residential care	No	1364	852 (63)	512 (38)	(ref)	32.09	0.00***
	Yes	70	20 (29)	50 (71)	4.16		
CSE concern	No	1386	850 (61)	536 (39)	(ref)	4.67	0.03*
	Yes	48	22 (46)	26 (54)	1.87		

Note. CSE = child sexual exploitation; OR = odds ratio; ref = reference category.

\* p < .05;  
 \*\* p < .01;  
 \*\*\* p < .001.

**Table 4**  
Nested logistic regression models predicting repeat missing child reports.

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4		
	OR	95% CI		OR	95% CI		OR	95% CI		OR	95% CI	
Teenager	1.60**	1.22	2.09	1.33	0.97	1.84	1.27	0.92	1.75	1.25	0.91	1.73
White	–	–	–	1.71**	1.24	2.38	1.78**	1.28	2.48	1.77**	1.27	2.47
Residential care	–	–	–	–	–	–	3.70***	2.01	6.81	3.70***	2.01	6.80
CSE concern	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	1.36	0.73	2.53
Constant	0.44			0.41			0.39			0.39		
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>	0.01			0.02			0.04			0.04		
n	1434			1073			1073			1073		

Note. CI = confidence interval; CSE = child sexual exploitation; OR = odds ratio.

\*  $p < .05$ ;

\*\*  $p < .01$ ;

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

two months. Children in residential care were reported missing for a second time at a quicker rate than their peers. An earlier study by Sidebottom et al. (2019) found no significant difference in the timing of repeat reports for children in care and children at home. In their study, children living in different care placements were grouped. It is possible that there are subgroup differences in the temporal pattern of repeat reports for children in care and there is evidence to suggest that children living in different placements are at different levels of risk, with children in residential care more likely to go missing than children in foster care (Courtney and Zinn, 2009).

When examining the length of missing incidents, we found that nearly all reports (90 per cent) involved children who were located within 48 h. This finding is consistent with earlier research (Sidebottom et al., 2019; Tarling and Burrows, 2003; UK Missing Persons Unit, 2021). The results support the previous finding that children who go missing repeatedly stay away from home for a similar time to children who are reported missing once (Babuta and Sidebottom, 2018).

### 5.1. Strengths and limitations

This study has several strengths, as well as some noteworthy limitations. Strengths include the inclusion of police records for all missing children in the local authority over a five-year period, including data on the children's demographics and time estimates that were recorded close in time to the missing incidents. Using administrative data was an efficient approach to studying repeat reports, and it reduced the burden on research participants. In terms of limitations, it is likely that the problem of repeat missing child reports has been underestimated for two reasons. First, missing children are in general underreported to the police (Rees, 2011). Second, the police data covered missing person reports in one local authority. If a child moved in or out of the local authority during the five-year period, then their previous or subsequent missing person reports would not be known. Furthermore, ethnicity was not recorded for 25 per cent of the sample and where known, most children were White (82 per cent). A more complete dataset and more diverse sample would help to further explore the potential relationship between ethnicity and missing person reports. The analysis in this study was limited to the variables that were available, and the final model explained only four per cent of the variance. Future studies should seek to include data on other risk factors that have been identified in the literature (e.g., history of abuse, mental health, and school attendance). This may improve the amount of variance that the regression model can explain.

### 5.2. Implications for practice

This study demonstrates the potential opportunity that exists to help prevent a substantial number of future missing person reports. Most missing child reports (82 per cent) were concerning individuals who had been reported missing previously. Intervening promptly at the time of a

child's first missing episode could help protect children from further risk of harm and reduce future demand on police services. The timing of support is likely to be particularly important for children in residential care, where there appears to be a smaller window of opportunity (one month) to intervene if future disappearances are to be minimised. The police are responsible for conducting a 'safe and well' check as soon as possible after the child returns, and this is followed by a more in-depth Return Home Interview that is organised by social services (HMIC, 2016). Together these interviews aim to understand why a child went missing, what happened while they were away, and what support they may need to reduce the likelihood of future disappearances. In practice, the interviews are not always offered in a timely way and information is often not routinely shared between agencies (HMIC, 2016; NYAS Cmyru, 2020). They are also not consistently documented in police records or used to inform case planning (Ofsted, 2013).

Our results also show significant differences between children who were reported missing once and children who were reported missing repeatedly. This finding supports the notion that children who are reported missing repeatedly are a distinct group that are likely to benefit from a tailored intervention (Hutchings et al., 2019; Thompson and Pollio, 2006). Children in residential care were especially likely to be reported missing repeatedly. The police, social services, and other partners have been advised to work together to support children in residential care who are at-risk of going missing (Department for Education, 2014). Partnership working can be challenging, and the relationship between the police and residential staff has been described as "fractured" and "frustrating" (Colvin et al., 2018). This is partly due to a lack of agreement about each other's roles and responsibilities and when children should be reported missing (APPG, 2012; Colvin et al., 2018). Despite this, HMIC (2016) and Ofsted (2013) identified examples of good practice including regular police visits to residential homes, monthly multi-agency meetings, and joint protocols that aim to improve the response to missing children.

## 6. Conclusion

Children who go missing repeatedly are at risk of exploitation, involvement in crime, substance misuse, and homelessness (Brakenhoff et al., 2015; Jago et al., 2011; Shalev, 2011; Windle, 1989). It is important to improve our understanding of repeat missing episodes so we can better support and protect children from harm. Reducing repeat disappearances would benefit children, their families and carers, and the community. It would also ease the demand and cost to services. This study used five years of police data to explore the repetitive nature of missing child reports in one local authority. Our findings suggest that professionals and services need to act quickly to support children after their first missing episode to prevent future disappearances. Results from the logistic regression identified that children who were White and living in residential care were more likely to be reported missing repeatedly. The relationship between being in care and repeat missing

reports has been consistently reported (Babuta and Sidebottom, 2018; Hutchings et al., 2019; Sidebottom et al., 2019). Future research in more diverse parts of the UK would help us understand more about the potential relationship between ethnicity and missing person reports.

#### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Zoe Bezeczek:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft. **David Wilkins:** Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

#### Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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