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Return home interviews with children who have been missing: an exploratory analysis

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ABSTRACT

Responding to reports of missing children is an everyday occurrence in many police agencies, and a significant source of police demand. In England, there is a statutory requirement that all those under the age of 18 be offered a *return home interview* (RHI) within 72 hours of returning from a missing episode. The main purpose of an RHI is to better understand the reasons why a young person went missing and, where necessary, put measures in place to safeguard that young person and reduce the likelihood of them going missing again. Although widely practiced in England, there is currently limited research on the conduct of and information elicited from RHIs. In an attempt to help fill this research gap, this article reports the findings of an exploratory analysis of 113 RHIs carried out in one police force area in England. Findings indicate that 42% (n = 48) of the sampled RHIs occurred within the required 72-hour timeframe. Absent or incomplete information was common, particularly in relation to the presence and types of vulnerabilities associated with missing children. In terms of those interviewed, nearly half of the interviewees did not consider themselves to be missing. Moreover, many exhibited a high prevalence of mental health concerns, conflict at home and drug and alcohol use. The implications of the findings for safeguarding children and preventing missing incidents are discussed.

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Exploitation; missing children; police; return home interview

Introduction

Each year, many thousands of children and young people are reported to the police as missing. In the United States (US), this equates to around 450,000 young people per year (FBI, 2015). In Canada, the same figure is around 40,000 (Huey, Ferguson & Kowalski, 2020). And in England and Wales, of the roughly 300,000 missing person incidents occurring per year, about two thirds involve those aged 18 and under (National Crime Agency, 2020, 2021). Responding to the high volume of missing incidents involving children is a major source of demand on the police (Babuta & Sidebottom, 2020). It is also a significant challenge: although the majority of missing children are found or return safely and swiftly, typically within 48 hours (Bricknell & Renshaw, 2016; Huey & Ferguson, 2020; National Crime Agency, 2021; Sidebottom et al., 2020), a small but important minority of missing children are exposed to harm whilst away from home (Doyle & Barnes, 2020; Rees & Lee, 2005). Indeed, there is a growing body of evidence linking childhood disappearances to an increased risk of sexual exploitation (Cockbain & Wortley, 2015; Scott & Skidmore, 2006), health-related harms (Whitbeck et al., 2007) and criminal exploitation (National Crime Agency, 2017; The Children's Society, 2018).

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Moreover, longitudinal studies demonstrate that children who go missing exhibit an increased likelihood of various negative outcomes occurring later in life including drug and alcohol dependencies, self-injurious behaviour and suicide (Stevenson & Thomas, 2018).

The safeguarding of vulnerable young people is a key priority area in many jurisdictions. It is a task which touches upon a variety of public services from policing and healthcare to housing and social work. To this end, in England, the focus of this paper, it is a statutory requirement that within 72 hours of a young person (under 18) returning from a missing episode, they are to be offered a *return home interview* (RHI). The stated aims of an RHI are to 'provide an opportunity to uncover information that can help protect children from the risk of going missing again, from risks they may have been exposed to while missing or from risk factors in their home' (Department for Education, 2014, p. 14). It is local authorities, rather than the police service, who are responsible for arranging RHIs.¹ RHIs are thus separate from the prevention interviews and 'safe and well' checks of missing children ordinarily undertaken by the police in England. Indeed, part of the rationale for RHIs being conducted by an independent child welfare service is the suggestion that some children might be more willing to disclose personal and potentially sensitive information to non-police agencies (see, Pona et al., 2019).

To the authors' knowledge, there are no accurate statistics on the number of RHIs carried out in England each year. However, given the annual number of police recorded missing incidents involving children is typically in the region of 200,000, one can assume that the scale and cost associated with RHIs is significant (National Crime Agency, 2020). Despite the widespread use of RHIs in England and their potentially important role in the support and safeguarding of vulnerable children, presently little is known about the type and quality of information they elicit, nor their effectiveness in informing efforts to support children who have gone missing previously. This lack of research is likely owing to difficulties in accessing RHI data, which by definition involves potentially vulnerable people and sensitive topics.

Building on recent research (Missing People, 2019; Pona et al., 2019, described below), this article reports an exploratory analysis of a sample of RHIs conducted in one UK police force area. The study has three broad aims:

- (1) To determine what information is routinely collected in RHIs
- (2) To explore what insights RHIs might provide on missing incidents and the young people involved, including their exposure to and experience of harm when missing
- (3) To consider how information gleaned from RHIs could inform efforts to support and safeguard young people who have gone missing.

We acknowledge from the outset that in many regions there is no formal, statutory requirement to interview young people who have been missing. Elsewhere (such as Canada) the police (and related agencies) often follow a more informal, rapport-building process albeit one with broadly the same aims as RHIs. Consequently, although our paper focuses on data from England, the findings presented here are considered relevant to the police, their partners and researchers in other jurisdictions who have an interest in and responsibility for the safeguarding of children and reduction of missing incidents.

Return home interviews: purpose, process and previous research

As described above, an RHI is a voluntary interview performed primarily by non-police agencies and offered to all those under the age of 18 who have been reported to the police as missing. The information collected as part of an RHI is meant to help identify any safeguarding concerns which can then be brought to the attention of relevant services, including the police (Hill et al., 2016). In this sense, RHIs usually result in two main outcomes: either no further action is taken or a referral for further follow-up support is initiated, based on the assessed needs and circumstances of the child or young person (The Railway Children, 2015).

Research on RHIs is limited. This is partly attributed to issues with data quality and accessibility (see for e.g., Ofsted, 2013; The Children's Society, 2013). Of the available research there has been two main areas of focus. The first is concerned with the *conduct* of RHIs. This line of research deals mainly with questions regarding the timeliness, setting and duration of RHIs, as well as the extent and correlates of interviewee engagement. The literature identifies marked variation in the conduct of RHIs by commissioning organisation and the localities within which they take place. For example, in their study of 255 RHIs carried out in Scotland, Mitchell et al. (2014) report that less than two thirds of interviews took place within the designated period (there 5 days). Interviews generally lasted between 30–90 minutes, occurred in a variety of locations including the family home, school and care settings, and typically involved the presence of a friend or parent. Those children who took part in RHIs were generally appreciative of a professional taking the time to ask questions about and show an interest in their welfare.

Similar variation was found by Hill et al. (2016). They reported that whilst contact with a child who had been missing was usually made within the designated 72 hours, the RHI was not always conducted within this time frame. This delay was attributed to the commissioned interview providers prioritising methods which encouraged maximum engagement (e.g., allowing the child to choose the RHI location and whether to be interviewed by someone known to them) rather than sticking rigidly to the 72 hour time frame. Unlike Mitchell et al. (2014), most children covered in this case study were interviewed alone. When parents, guardians or appropriate adults were present, Hill et al. (2016) observed that their involvement posed difficulties for building rapport with the interviewer which in turn affected the extent and nature of information elicited.

Pona et al. (2019) examined the use of RHIs by local authorities across England and Wales to paint a national picture of their provision and to identify good practice. They identified recurrent concerns about the feasibility of conducting RHIs within 72 hours, mainly due to high staff workloads, challenges in gaining the consent of parents or guardians (particularly for repeatedly missing children), and confusion over when the 72-hour window starts (i.e., whether it starts when the missing child is returned, or when the referral is made to the RHI service). Furthermore, it was found that not all children who had gone missing agreed to take part in an RHI: acceptance rates were generally in the region of 60% (Pona et al., 2019). Moreover, of those children who did take part in RHIs, there was considerable variation in their willingness to engage. McIver and Welch (2018) found that young people were more likely to consent to an RHI if the interviewer was already known to them.

The role and organisation of the person running the RHI has also been found to vary (Pona et al., 2019). The 2014 Guidance states that a RHI is 'best carried out by an independent person (i.e., someone not involved in caring for the child) who is trained to carry out these interviews and is able to follow up any actions that emerge' (Department for Education, 2014, p. 14). The Children's Society's (2013) add that RHIs are better provided by independent services that are not associated with statutory services (i.e., the police or social workers). They suggest that a child's engagement with the interview could be lessened when with a social worker or discouraged by negative attitudes of police professionals towards missing children. In relation to the police specifically, a 2016 inspection into the UK police response to missing children found evidence of some negative attitudes towards missing children (particularly those who go missing repeatedly) which in turn impacted the confidence of children in the police. This is supported by Colvin et al. (2018) who found police officers often held deep frustration with the demand relating to children repeatedly reported missing, particularly from care placements.

Negative attitudes towards missing children are echoed in some children's experiences of the police. Beckett et al. (2015) found the majority of children in their study were unhappy with the response from the police to their missing episode, and felt the response was punitive rather than vulnerability-focused. In their study of police attitudes towards missing children, Harris and Shalev-Greene (2016) recall one police officer who stated that 'Young people close down immediately when they see the uniform . . . and the whole thing becomes a tick box exercise' (p. 9). These

studies suggest that from both the police and the child's perspective, there is a cycle of police frustration and children's lack of trust or engagement with the police that limit the disclosure potential of the RHI, thus supporting the guidance that the RHI should be conducted by an independent worker, rather than the police.

The second and more popular line of research is concerned with the *value* of RHIs. These studies typically focus on the extent to which RHIs elicit actionable information relating to the needs of young people who have gone missing and the harms they may have experienced when missing. The consensus from this line of research is that RHIs have the potential to elicit information hitherto unknown to relevant professional services (Beckett et al., 2015). For instance, Mitchell et al. (2014) concluded that overall young people *did* disclose, often new, information in their RHI on their reasons for going missing and what had happened whilst they were away. Analysis by Missing People (2019) similarly found generally high rates of disclosure during RHIs. Importantly from the perspective of interventions designed to support the child, in the majority of cases (90%) the child consented to the information gleaned from RHI to be shared with the police and allied child welfare services (Missing People, 2019). Research by The Railway Children (2015) suggests other positive outcomes that come from RHIs include improved family relationships, greater confidence and a more positive outlook for the child. Their report also suggests that the social value attributed to RHIs outweighs the level of investment, estimating that every £1 spent yields a social value of £5.27.

Repeat missing incidents involving children are common (Babuta & Sidebottom, 2020; Sidebottom et al., 2020; Huey et al., 2020; Galliano, Hunter, Davies & Sidebottom, 2021). For example, a recent study from the UK found that eighty percent of missing episodes related to a young person who had been reported missing more than once over the 12-month study period (Galliano et al. 2021). Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, views are mixed over the extent to which RHIs help reduce the likelihood of a child going missing in the future. For instance, Harris (2019) found that only 1% of police officers spoken to as part of their study felt RHIs helped prevent future missing episodes. On the other hand, in 2013, the Children's Society stated that 60% of young people offered RHI and subsequent support via the SCARPA project (Safeguarding Children at Risk – Prevention and Action) do stop or reduce missing episodes and associated risky behaviours. Similarly, Ofsted (2013) give an account of a RHI scheme in Worcestershire (UK) that is linked to a 30% reduction in missing children incidents over a year.

Method

Data

This study draws on information recorded in RHI forms that were submitted to one English police force over the three-month period of October to December 2018 (inclusive).² There is no standard template for RHIs in England, and it therefore warrants mention at this point that in preparing the data for analysis, disparities were observed in the nature of the interview form used by the five different service providers within this sample. For example, one local authority used a form which included only tick box yes/no questions while another provided space for only free-text answers to be completed by the interviewer. Furthermore, some local authorities specifically asked whether the interviewee was a looked after child or had previous missing from home episodes, while others did not. As we describe below, the information contained in these RHI forms was extracted by the authors to construct a database which forms the basis of the research reported here.

An initial sample of 169 RHI forms was made available to the authors. All RHI forms were read at police premises and anonymised by a (vetted) member of the research team using PDF editing software. Ethical approval was received from the lead author's institution and supported by the police force. Redacted and anonymised RHI forms were then removed from the police force information systems for the purposes of analysis.

Several RHIs were excluded from our sample pre-analysis: (i) 39 cases where a RHI was offered to the missing person but it was refused and the RHI was not completed, and (ii) 17 cases where the submitted RHI was a duplicate. Our sample also included cases where the RHI was recorded by the interviewer as refused, but the RHI form was partially completed using information from sources other than interviewing the child e.g., conversations with a relative, care home staff or previous conversations with the child that were not part of the official RHI. Following exclusions our final sample comprised 113 RHI forms relating to 90 children.

Data preparation

A codebook was created to extract information from the remaining RHI forms. The codebook was developed based on the findings of prior research (reviewed above) and through discussions with relevant police and partner agency staff involved in missing persons and RHIs specifically. Codebook items were organised into two main themes, reflecting the RHI research literature: the *conduct* and *content* of RHIs. Under these two broad themes, the codebook was made up of five sections: (i) *file information* (including a unique identifier for each RHI form and a unique identifier for the child or young person being interviewed), (ii) *RHI information* (including the date and location of the RHI and the organisation conducted the RHI), (iii) *interviewee information* (including the demographics of the young person, whether they had been reported missing previously, whether they were in care etc.), (iv) *missing episode information* (including the reported reasons for going missing, the circumstances of the missing episode, whether the child reported being victimised when missing), and (v) *vulnerability* (relating to information gleaned through RHI about existing vulnerabilities, engagement with children's services, previous victimisation and so on). From the information provided in the RHI forms, we computed one additional variable indicating the time between a child being found/returning home from a missing episode and the RHI taking place. The codebook was refined iteratively based on our reading and rereading of the RHI forms included in our sample.

We encountered some challenges in extracting information from our sample of RHIs. These challenges were mainly attributed to variation in the nature and circumstances of each missing episode, as well as differences in the questions asked and the amount of information recorded in RHIs. Furthermore, for many variables included in our codebook, there was a high percentage of unknown or not recorded information (such as interviewee race/ethnicity and whether they had gone missing previously). To try to ensure greater consistency in coding, two of the authors independently read and coded a random dip sample of 30% of RHIs, consistent with the recommendations of O'Connor and Joffe (2020). Inter-rater reliability for this coding sample was 73%, generally considered to be an acceptable level of agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977). Disagreements were resolved through discussion.

Analysis

Extracted information was entered into SPSS for analysis. Kruskal-Wallis was performed to assess whether differences in the delay between a child returning and the completion of the RHI across variables were statistically significant. Spearman's correlation coefficients were used to examine the relationship between scale variables, and chi-square tests were used to examine associations between categorical variables. The redacted and anonymised RHI files were also entered into NVivo 10 software to extract indicative quotes to supplement quantitative findings.

Results

The foregoing results are organised into three sections: (i) interviews, (ii) individuals and (iii) incidents. Interviews relates to findings about the conduct and characteristics of the sampled RHIs. Individuals relates to findings on the attributes and histories of those children and young people participating in the sampled RHIs. Finally, the section on incidents relates to the child's reported account of their missing episode and in particular their experience of harm when missing. Indicative quotes taken directly from RHI forms are used to illustrate key findings.

Interviews

A range of organisations were represented in the analysed RHIs. Of the 113 RHIs we assessed, just under half were conducted by local authority exploitation teams ($n = 45$, 40%) followed (in descending order) by local authority children's social care teams ($n = 35$, 31%), an independent commissioned service ($n = 26$, 23%), an unnamed provider ($n = 5$, 4%) and a third sector charity ($n = 2$, 2%). Though five RHIs did not state which organisation had conducted the interviews, the nature of the form and the responses to questions indicated that the interview was completed by residential care staff.

With regards to the format of the RHI form by organisation, local authority exploitation teams tended to elicit the most detailed information in interviews. The exploitation teams used forms with a combination of open questions and closed tick box questions. The open questions enabled children to provide a more free-flowing narrative on their reasons for going missing and their whereabouts whilst missing. Closed tick-box questions provided some standardisation to the interview to allow key questions to be asked in each interview on why the child went missing (e.g., *Peer pressure? To get drugs/alcohol?*); what happened whilst missing (e.g., *Did anything bad happen to you – hurt, injured, drugged, abused (sexual, physical, mental? Were you offered drink/drugs – how much, what was it, was it bought, given or stolen and where from?*); and how the child returned (e.g., *Did you return of your own accord? How do you feel now that you are back?*). Children's social care teams and the independent commissioned service both used the same RHI form which consisted of open questions, asking the child a series of questions on why they went missing and where they went, and providing a space for recommendations from the interviewer on any identified risks and safeguarding needs. The third sector charity used a different RHI form, which used a combination of open questions on why the child went missing and where they went, and some closed tick-box questions with some specific questions around exploitation. Though the third sector forms combined open and closed-questions, there were fewer questions than the exploitation teams' forms, and in both third sector RHIs the tick-box questions were incomplete.

Our analysis found that the agency conducting the RHI was significantly related to the home status of the child reported missing ($X^2(2) = 24.84$, $p < .001$). For example, the commissioned service tended to interview children living at their family home ($n = 24$, 92.3%) as opposed to those reported missing from a care setting ($n = 0$). By contrast, children residing in care made up the majority of RHIs conducted by children's social care teams ($n = 25$, 71.4%) compared to those living at home ($n = 5$, 14.3%). When a child was interviewed more than once within the sample, it was generally found that the same organisation interviewed them each time.

Just over a fifth of RHIs ($n = 24$) were refused, either by the young person or by their parent, guardian or carer. Refusal rates were higher among children in care ($n = 15$, 30.6%), compared to children living at home ($n = 3$, 5.4%). Indeed, RHI refusal was significantly associated with the child's home status, $X^2(2) = 24.84$, $p < .001$.

Statutory guidance requires that RHIs be conducted within 72 hours of a child returning from a missing episode. Consistent with previous research (Pona et al., 2019), our analysis suggests that the 72-hour deadline is often missed. The mean time elapsed between a child returning and the RHI being conducted was five days (range = same day to 24 days post missing episode). Of the total 113 RHIs, 48

(42%) were conducted within 72 hours of a child returning. Further analysis revealed statistically significant differences in the time-to-interview between: (i) the organisation conducting the interview, $F(2,96) = 6.79, p < .01$; (ii) whether the child had gone missing before, $F(3,95) = 6.21, p = .001$, and; (iii) whether the child was known to Children's Services prior to the RHI, $F(2,13.05) = 4.28, p < .05$. Specifically, Tukey post hoc tests revealed that the time taken to conduct the RHI was significantly longer for the independent commissioned service ($M = 7.32$ days, $SD = 4.31$) compared to Local Authority Exploitation Team ($M = 3.43$ days, $SD = 3.88$), but was significantly shorter for children who had gone missing before ($M = 3.42$, $SD = 3.45$) compared to those for whom it was unknown ($M = 6.91$ days, $SD = 4.61$). A Games-Howell post hoc test also found that the delay to interview was significantly shorter for children who were known to Children's Services ($M = 3.83$ days, $SD = 3.46$). A Mann-Whitney test found that this was also significantly shorter for children where there was evidence to suggest previous engagement with crime prior to the missing episode ($Mdn = 3$ days) compared to those for whom criminal engagement was unknown ($Mdn = 4$ days), $U = 871.5, p < .05$.

Individuals

The children and young people partaking in our sampled RHIs ranged in age from eight to 17 years old ($M = 14.49$, $SD = 1.69$). Spearman's rank correlation coefficient found that there were significant positive relationships between the age of the interviewee and: (i) the duration of the missing episode ($\rho = .303, p < .01$) and (ii) the total number of missing episodes as reported in the RHI ($\rho = .363, p < .05$). Mindful of the non-representative sample, in our data it appeared that as age increases, the duration and frequency of missing episodes tends to increase.

There were 70 males in the sample (62%), 40 females (35%) and the sex of three interviewees was unknown or not recorded (3%). The race/ethnicity of the children was unknown or not recorded for the majority of our sample ($n = 72$, 64%). Of those RHI forms where such information was provided, 29 individuals were classified as white (26%), eight as Asian (7%), two (2%) as mixed race/ethnicity, one (1%) as Black and one (1%) as belonging to another racial/ethnic group.

Exactly half ($n = 56$) of the RHIs related to a child living in a family home when they went missing; 49 (43%) related to a child in care and in eight (7%) cases the status of the missing child was unknown or not recorded.³ Previous or existing vulnerabilities and/or trauma in the children's histories were often explored as part of the RHI, as shown in Table 1. It is noteworthy that in the majority of these fields, however, the RHI forms indicated either 'unknown', 'question not asked', 'not answered' or 'not stated'. Consequently, the percentages reported in Table 1 are unlikely to be an accurate reflection of the proportion of missing children that have experienced and/or exhibit the items reported. Moreover, it should be noted that for some children participating in an RHI, these attributes may well be known to the interviewer in advance and stored in other documents and systems, to which we did not have access. Clearly the analysis reported here relates only to that information which was reported in the RHI form.

Of the 46 RHIs which showed that the child being interviewed had engaged in crime previously, 72% ($n = 33$) were drug related, 11% ($n = 5$) related to violent offences, 7% ($n = 3$) were theft, 4% ($n = 2$) were sexual offences, 2% ($n = 1$) related to 'other' offences and, the crime type was unknown for 7% ($n = 3$). Of the 36 RHIs which involved an admittance of using drugs prior to this missing episode, a majority confirmed this related to using cannabis specifically ($n = 26$).

In most interviews, exploitation was not directly discussed or recorded, albeit references to a child's potential risk of vulnerability to exploitation were common. Experiencing child sexual exploitation (CSE) was confirmed for three (3%) children, suspected for nine (8%) and unknown or not recorded in 100 cases (89%). Experiencing child criminal exploitation (CCE) was confirmed for four (4%) children, suspected for 12 (11%) and unknown for 97 (86%). Whether the child was linked to an organised crime group was unknown for the majority of the sample ($n = 104$, 92%), but a link was confirmed for four children (4%) and suspected for another five (4%). In some interviews,

Table 1. Child history and vulnerabilities present prior to this missing episode.

	Yes	No	Unknown
Known to Children's Services	82 (73%)	7 (6%)	24 (21%)
Has an active key worker	61 (54%)	2 (2%)	50 (44%)
Engaged in crime	46 (41%)	-	67 (59%)
Conflict at home	40 (35%)	12 (11%)	61 (54%)
Behavioural problems	36 (32%)	3 (3%)	74 (66%)
Used drugs	36 (32%)	3 (3%)	74 (66%)
Has mental health issues	23 (20%)	3 (3%)	87 (77%)
Association with older peers	19 (17%)	1 (1%)	93 (82%)
Drank alcohol	11 (10%)	5 (4%)	97 (86%)
Subject to a Child in Need Plan	10 (9%)	12 (11%)	91 (81%)
Been a victim of a crime	9 (8%)	1 (1%)	103 (91%)
Has a disability	9 (8%)	6 (5%)	98 (87%)
Arrested, charged or prosecuted	9 (8%)	1 (1%)	103 (91%)
Subject to a Child Protection Plan	8 (7%)	12 (11%)	93 (82%)
Has learning difficulties	5 (4%)	6 (5%)	102 (90%)
Previous neglect	4 (3.5%)	-	109 (97%)
Been homeless	3 (3%)	-	110 (97%)
Has physical health issues	3 (3%)	5 (4%)	105 (93%)

factors that are associated with either CCE or CSE such as the child returning home with large amounts of money, or association with older peers are discussed but exploitation concerns are not explicitly written in the interview:

One weekend he came home with a gold chain but wouldn't disclose where it was from. During one MFH [missing from home] episode when the Police came to do a safe and well check they conducted a search of his bedroom and found a carrier bag containing new clothes and new trainers with a receipt for over £200.00. Staff do not know where has got this money from. (RHI_101)

[Name] was away from home for approx 2 hours and has reported that she was with an adult male who she has previously disclosed having sex with. It is believed that this is an exploitative relationship and that this adult poses a risk to [Name]. She has not reported any sexual activity on this occasion but concerns remain that this adult is grooming for the purposes of CSE. CCE cannot be ruled out given the known links between some of the adults involved with and drug supply. (RHI_108)

Almost half ($n = 54$, 48%) of the children had at least one previous missing episode before the episode relating to the current RHI and this was the first missing episode for 16 children (14%), however, this was unknown and/or not recorded for 43 children (38%). Furthermore, whilst for the majority ($n = 78$, 69%) this was the only RHI recorded, 35 (31%) children had more than one RHI in this sample. One child was reported to have gone missing at least 37 times in the 12 months prior to the RHI:

[Name] continues to go missing and is reported by placement near enough every day. Attempts to see him to complete the RHI continue to be unsuccessful as [Name] is very rarely in placement and his whereabouts are not known. (RHI_32).

Whether or not this was the first missing episode for the child was significantly associated with: (i) the organisation conducting the RHI, $X^2(2) = 57.14$, $p < .001$; (ii) the child's home status, $X^2(4) = 28.99$, $p < .001$; (iii) where the child was missing from, $X^2(6) = 19.77$, $p < .01$; (iv) drug use whilst missing, $X^2(4) = 14.34$, $p < .01$; (v) whether the child was known to Children's Services, $X^2(4) = 60.62$, $p < .001$; (vi) whether the child had an active key worker, $X^2(4) = 22.02$, $p < .001$; (vii) whether the child had engaged in crime before this missing episode, $X^2(2) = 18.39$, $p < .001$; (viii) the crime type engaged with before missing episode, $X^2(12) = 28.83$, $p < .01$; (ix) having used drugs before the missing episode, $X^2(4) = 14.61$, $p < .01$; and (x) having used cannabis before the missing episode, $X^2(6) = 116.35$, $p < .05$ (see, Table 2).

Table 2. Significant chi-square associations: first timers, repeats and unknown.

	First time missing	Repeat	Unknown
Child has more than one RHI in sample	2 (12.5%)	28 (51.9%)*	5 (11.6%)
RHI conducted by: the Independent Commissioned Service	0	2 (3.7%)	24 (55.8%)*
RHI conducted by: Local Authority Exploitation Team	11 (68.8%)*	32 (59.3%)*	2 (4.7%)
RHI conducted by: Local Authority	4 (25%)	15 (27.8%)	1 (2.3%)
RHI conducted by: Unknown/Charity	1 (6.3%)	5 (9.3%)	1 (2.3%)
Home status: Living at home with family	12 (75%)*	19 (35.2%)	25 (58.1%)
Home status: Living in care	4 (25%)	35 (64.8%)*	10 (23.3%)
Home status: Unknown	0	0	8 (18.6%)
Missing from: Home	11 (68.8%)*	19 (35.2%)	23 (53.5%)
Missing from: Care placement	4 (25%)	29 (53.7%)*	8 (18.6%)
Used drugs whilst missing	3 (18.8%)	16 (29.6%)*	2 (4.7%)
Was known to Children's Services	10 (62.5%)	50 (92.6%)*	22 (51.2%)
Had an active key worker	8 (50%)	37 (68.5%)*	16 (37.2%)
Engaged in crime prior to missing episode	7 (43.8%)	32 (59.3%)*	7 (16.3%)
Engaged in drug-related crime prior to episode	4 (25%)	24 (44.4%)*	5 (11.6%)
Used drugs prior to this missing episode	4 (25%)	26 (48.1%)*	6 (14%)
Used cannabis prior to this missing episode	3 (18.8%)	19 (35.2%)*	4 (9.3%)

* $p < .05$

Incident

The missing episodes covered in our sample lasted between one hour and nine days (227 hours), with an average missing period of 22 hours ($SD = 26.53$). All RHI forms contained questions about the reason(s) why a child went missing. However, our analysis revealed that this information was often missing, unclear and variable in description. Often the reasons reported on the RHI form related to more than one of the variable categories, and so that which appeared more dominant in the narrative of the interview was the code given. A small number were coded as problems at school ($n = 5, 4\%$), not able to get home, i.e., their mobile phone battery had died so were unable to return ($n = 5, 4\%$), or suspected exploitation ($n = 3, 3\%$). However, the majority of children cited 'problems at home' ($n = 37, 33\%$) which for our purposes covers a range of issues raised by the child (i.e., arguments with family/carers, dislike of care placement, and residing in a care placement that is in a different area to the child's friends and/or family), followed by wanting to see friends/attend a party ($n = 29, 26\%$):

He had a disagreement with his mum over his mobile phone and he stormed out (RHI_129).

This MFH episode appears to have been set off by [Name] wanting to stay at a party leading him to not tell his mum where he was (RHI_10).

Importantly, only a minority of children represented in these RHIs explicitly perceived themselves as missing ($n = 18, 16\%$). Instead, 45 (40%) did not consider themselves to be missing or understood why they were reported to the police as missing. However, this view was not known or was not asked for 50 of the children interviewed (44%):

[Name] did not class himself as missing and was angry and frustrated that he had been reported missing to the police when he says staff knew he was on his way home (RHI_34).

In 22 (20%) interviews, the child did not disclose where they had been whilst missing. Those that did include this information stated (in descending order): the 'local area/town' ($n = 38, 34\%$), a friend's house ($n = 30, 27\%$), to see family ($n = 7, 6\%$), or to go to a party ($n = 5, 4\%$). Three children (3%) stated that they went outside their local area whilst missing. Often the child went to multiple places whilst missing, so the place which appeared most dominant in the interview was the code given. Similarly, often the child would not disclose who they were with whilst missing ($n = 22, 20\%$). Sometimes the child would change who they were with whilst missing and have periods where they are alone. To code these episodes, the person/people that the child states they were with

for the majority of their missing episode was the code given. For the majority, this was with friends ($n = 62$, 55%). Otherwise, some were alone ($n = 9$, 8%), with family ($n = 7$, 6%), or with a boyfriend or girlfriend ($n = 7$, 6%).

As indicated previously, a stated aim of a RHI is to identify information to protect children from the risks they may be exposed to whilst missing (Department for Education, 2014). Our analysis found that factors relating to harm whilst missing were often not reported in the RHI forms and it is unknown whether this is due to the question not being asked, not being answered, or whether these details were not included in the written RHI, therefore we cannot rely on these figures due to the large amount of unknowns. Despite this, the data extracted from our sample of RHIs is reported for consideration in Table 3. One (<1%) RHI indicated that the child being interviewed was considered to have been vulnerable to CCE during their missing episode, whilst eight (7%) were suspected of CCE and CSE vulnerability. Twenty-five (22%) children stated that they engaged in crime during the missing episode. Engagement in crime did not include smoking or consensual sex between minors. Most engagement in crime was drug related ($n = 15$, 13%), which includes consumption as well as drug running and drug selling (which may be related to CCE although this could not be determined from the data), though the majority related to consumption. Other crime engaged with related to theft ($n = 5$, 4%) and violence ($n = 3$, 3%). Out of the 21 who confirmed taking drugs whilst missing, 95% ($n = 20$) confirmed using cannabis whilst missing. For the 41 children (36%) who had engaged with the police whilst missing, this typically related to being returned home by the police ($n = 29$, 26%). For certain individuals, engagement with the police related to involvement in crime ($n = 2$, 2%) or being a victim of crime themselves ($n = 1$, 1%).

Out of the 113 children interviewed, 48 (43%) returned of their own accord, 27 (24%) were found by police, eight (7%) were found by a family member or carer, eight (7%) were found/returned via 'other' means (i.e., the child has been located but has refused to return to their home address), and it was unknown how 22 (20%) returned. The majority ($n = 39$, 35%) were found at home/placement (i.e., came home of their own accord), 16 (14.2%) were found around their local area or town, 14 (12%) were found at a friend's house, 13 (12%) were found at another family members house, five (4%) were found elsewhere and it was unknown where 26 (23%) were found.

Discussion

Tens of thousands of children and young people are reported missing in England each year. The majority return home within two days. When they do, it is a mandatory requirement that they be offered a voluntary RHI, designed to: (i) better understand and address the reasons why a child went missing; (ii) establish any harm they may have suffered when missing; and (iii) reduce the likelihood of them going missing again. Despite RHIs being widely used and advocated, there is currently a lack of research into the conduct and content of these interviews as well as the variation between service providers (Pona et al., 2019). Against this backdrop, this study sought to explore what insights can be gleaned from an analysis of 113 RHIs supplied to one English police force.

Guidance dictates that RHIs should be offered to all children recorded as missing and that the interview be completed within 72 hours of their return. Universal coverage is unrealistic. Children or parents and guardians may decline the offer of a RHI or may be unobtainable. In this sample, 79% of RHI were completed. The reasons why the remaining 21% of offers were declined was not recorded in our data, although it was found that refusal rates were significantly higher among children who lived in care. In terms of the timing of interview, previous research suggests that meeting the 72-hour deadline is challenging, owing mainly to the high volume of missing incidents and correspondingly high workloads of those charged with carrying out RHIs (Mitchell et al., 2014). A similar pattern was observed here, with less than half of all RHIs (42%) taking place within the three-day window. Further analysis considering the circumstances of the missing child suggested

Table 3. Harm experienced whilst missing.

	Yes	No	Unknown	Indicative Quote
Engaged with police	41 (36%)	21 (19%)	51 (45%)	The police officer expressed that he has taken him home due to him being under the influence' (RHL_59).
Engaged in crime	25 (22%)	29 (26%)	59 (52%)	'[Name] has been arrested for a serious Assault under Section 18' (RHL_32).
Drug use	21 (19%)	39 (35%)	53 (47%)	'He stated that he has been smoking cannabis when missing from home and he also tried something called LEAN [...] [LEAN] is prescription medicine mixed with codeine. It can be potentially fatal when users are not clear of the dosage mix causing an increased risk of overdosing' (RHL_106).
Alcohol use	16 (14%)	43 (38%)	54 (48%)	"She went out to a house party and got really drunk [...] She says she didn't know the address of the party or really anyone there but got really drunk and did 'stupid things' (RHL_26).
Victimisation	6 (5%)	44 (39%)	62 (55%)	'While [Name] was reported as missing, an ambulance attended to him, and he presented with a red mark, limp to his leg and he was stabbed above his eye. He refused medical treatment and walked away' (RHL_32).

notable variation across interviews; the time-to-interview was significantly shorter for children who had gone missing before, who were known to Children's Services and/or had previously engaged in crime. Consistent with the findings of Pona et al. (2019), these results may suggest that children judged to be at higher risk of harm and/or future disappearances were prioritised for RHI compared to children where such risks were deemed to be lower.

Considerable variation was observed in the type of questions asked by RHI providers. This supports existing research which found disparities in RHI practices. This disparity was particularly noticeable when comparing information relating to pre-existing trauma and vulnerabilities. For instance, for 38% of interviewed children it was unknown and/or not recorded whether they had been missing before this episode. The majority of these fields were unknown which resulted in difficulty generating meaningful and reliable inferential results, although some indicative patterns were explored. Pona et al. (2019) similarly identified that key information is often absent from RHIs, however they explained that this might reflect the fact that missing information was already recorded elsewhere in cases already known to services (i.e., in case files). Likewise, Hutchings et al. (2019) who collated information from multiple points of a multi-agency response to missing children reports, including the RHI, to build a predictive model of risk, reported a lack of reliability of data entry and missing data. Of the different RHI forms used by the organisations in this study, we found that the RHIs which seemed to elicit the most information were those used by the local authority exploitation teams. The RHI forms used a combination of closed tick-box questions, and open questions that allowed the child to give a free-flowing narrative about their experience whilst missing and reasons for going missing. The form specifically asks about previous missing episodes and records information on known vulnerabilities.

Although the relatively small sample of RHIs and prevalence of missing data restricted the capacity of our analysis, the analysis found patterns in the available data that warrant further investigation. For instance, 73% of our sample of missing children were already known to Children's Services, 54% had an active key worker and 48% had gone missing before. Nearly half of the RHIs (43%) related to children living in local authority care which is exceptionally high considering the proportion of children living in care in the general population (less than 1%). Children living in care were therefore extremely over-represented in our sample, supporting previous research finding that children in care are over-represented in missing persons data (Hayden & Shalev-Greene, 2018; Sidebottom et al., 2020).

Other prevalent patterns within our sample included: being involved in criminal activity prior to the missing episode (41%), reported conflict at home (35%), using drugs prior to the episode (32%), behavioural problems (32%) and mental health problems (20%). Though derived from a small sample of missing children, these themes support previous literature. For instance, Shalev (2011) found that 82% of repeatedly missing children had been involved in crime and arrested on at least one occasion. Furthermore, Hill et al. (2016) found 47% of children who had previously gone missing from home identified significant family stress and Meltzer et al. (2012) found these children had significantly higher adverse experiences than those who had never been missing before, including being the victim of sexual or physical abuse, being bullied, the death of a close family member and parental divorce or separation. Missing People (2019) found the same percentage of children interviewed via RHIs disclosed information suggestive of a mental health concern (one in five) as was found in the current study and that these rates were generally higher among children reported missing from care.

Interestingly, 40% of interviewees in our study did not perceive themselves to be missing or understood why they were reported missing. This is an important finding for several reasons. Firstly, this may suggest that children grossly underestimate their circumstances and/or do not understand the risk that they are in whilst missing. Previous research has similarly highlighted the challenge of vulnerable individuals who do not self-identify as victims (i.e., of County Lines related child criminal exploitation

or human trafficking) or at risk of victimisation and therefore do not want to engage with services (Cockbain & Brayley-Morris, 2018; Cockbain & Olver, 2019; The Children's Society, 2018). This finding also raises the question of over-or hasty reporting. If these interviewees were correct in their assessment that these were not legitimate missing incidents which posed a real risk to the child, then police involvement may not have been necessary, wanted or helpful in up to 40% of cases within this sample. Not only does this suggest that police resources may be being used inefficiently, but the impact of this event could have long term impact on the child being interviewed. Police involvement often requires that sensitive information be transferred which flouts right to privacy. It might leave a digital footprint and limit future job prospects. Furthermore, a self-perception that have been inappropriately reported as missing and/or that the RHI is unnecessary may lead to frustration, unwillingness to engage in the process and could go some way to explain the rate of refusals (Pona et al., 2019).

Whether or not the child had experienced harm, victimisation, and exploitation during the missing episode was not clearly recorded in a large proportion of RHIs (i.e., it was 'unknown' whether 55% of the sample had been a victim of crime during the missing episode). Furthermore, it was unknown how 20% of children returned from being missing and in 20% of the interviews, the child did not disclose where they were whilst missing or who they were with. This contrasts with the conclusions of Mitchell et al. (2014) who found that RHIs interviews produced detailed and useful information regarding what had happened while they were away. This dataset would suggest that for the majority of the sample (up to 55%), the RHIs did not produce detailed and useful information regarding what had happened while they were away. The details on where and with whom were rarely elicited in sufficient detail to inform future police activities/interventions. It is unknown whether this is due to the question not being asked, not being answered, or whether these details were recorded elsewhere but not included in the written RHI.

Limitations, implications and future research

It is important to acknowledge that the dataset used here was not designed for the purposes of statistical analysis. In accordance with this, there was much missing data as well as vast differences in the questions asked across agencies and interviews and ways of recording within sample. Due to the variation in the RHI forms and the high presence of missing data, we interpret the statistical analysis findings as indicative of patterns in the episodes of missing children that warrant further investigation. Relatedly, just because something is not recorded in this dataset (i.e., not record of experiencing sexual exploitation etc.), that does not mean it did not happen. It must also be understood that this is a difficult to engage with population and children may have been reluctant to offer their experiences to the interviewers. In practice, it is likely that the harm experienced during these missing episodes is underreported. It is also important to remember the limitations of this design. This study used a sample of RHI generated from a relatively short period of time (three months) from only one police force so is limited in terms of generalisability. The findings of this exploratory analysis highlight the need for further investigation into the use of RHIs in response to children who have been missing with larger samples of data.

Finally, one of the key implications from this study is the need for a benchmarking system to standardise the collection of information relating to harm, victimisation and exploitation that can assist in the safeguarding of children who have been missing. In addition to the style of the form, it is important to recognise that the role of the interviewer and their relationship with the child may have played a key role in the nature of information derived from the RHI. Further investigation is therefore needed into the impact of the skills, knowledge and experience of the interviewer on the information derived from an RHI, in addition to the tool they use.

Notes

1. RHIs fall under local authorities' duty of care to protect and promote the wellbeing of children within their jurisdiction. This is enshrined in The Children Act (2004), a piece of UK legislation designed to create clear accountability for children's services and enable better joint working between the agencies that are involved in children's lives (e.g., education, health, social care, law enforcement) to improve and prioritise the safeguarding of children.
2. To expand, in this study we requested three months of RHIs from the participating police force. Our study period is therefore based on the months in which the RHIs were shared with the police force by the relevant local authority agencies, not necessarily the month in which they took place. Due to variation in the time between the missing episode, the RHI taking place, and the RHI being shared with the police force, some RHIs in our sample were conducted outside of the three-month (October – December) study period. Specifically, 1% of RHIs had no date stated; 3% were conducted in July, 4% in August and 17% in September. The remaining 76% were conducted between October – December 2018.
3. Of those RHIs in care, 37 (76%) were in residential care, 9 (18%) in foster care, and 3 (6%) were unknown. 45 of RHIs (40%) related to a child in primary or high school, 9 (8%) were in further education, 8 (7%) in a Pupil Referral Unit, 7 (6%) were NEET, 3 (3%) in a SEN/SEMH school (were excluded from school at the time of the episode or interview, had poor attendance, or were in the process of moving schools), but the education status of many ($n = 41$, 36%) children were unknown/not recorded.

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