Distinguishing suicides of persons reported missing to police from those not reported missing

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Suicide

- One of the three leading causes of death among those aged 15–44
- For each adult there may be more than 20 others attempting suicide
- Some are reported missing to the police whereas others are not
- Suicide is a key consideration for investigators

The male suicide crisis: 'I just assumed I wasn’t designed to be happy'

Suicides are at the highest rate in decades, CDC report shows

Suicide rate rises among young people in England and Wales

rate among girls aged 13-19 hits record high: rate among men of all ages in UK is falling
Suicide by missing persons

Official figures unknown in the UK

Australian study suggests 2.5% - unlikely to apply to UK

Geoff Newiss – fatal missing person cases
- Missing suicides = male, average age of 42
- 25% family or relationship issues
- Some experienced critical life event

Australian study - attempted/completed suicide vs. run away/foul play
- Missing suicides = male, aged 41-65
- Acute and chronic stressors in their lives
- Depression, history of suicide attempts
- ~ 80% reporting person suggested suicide as a possible motive
Sveticic et al (2012) - Queensland, Australia

▲ Institutionalised and communicate their intent
▼ Live alone, have a physical illness / alcohol problems
▲ Found in natural outdoor locations
▲ Car exhaust gas, jumping from height or drowning
▼ Hanging

But - inconsistencies in Queensland police recording procedures

Two key research questions arise:

1. What percentage of individuals who die by suicide are reported missing in the UK?

2. Do those who are reported missing differ in any way from other individuals who die by suicide?

Can we inform practical action in terms of prevention and response?
Research method

• Content analysis
• Scottish Police Death Reports
• 160 suicides/undetermined deaths
• 3-year period January 2002 - 31 December 2004
• North-East of Scotland
• 36 (23%) were reported missing prior to being located (missing-suicide group)
• 124 (78%) were not reported missing (other-suicide group)

• Relative percentages of suicide & undetermined death same in each group

• 27 (75%) were male and 9 (25%) were female in the missing-suicide group
• 98 (79%) were male and 26 (21%) were female in the other-suicide group
Missing-suicide group were more likely to be older than those in the other-suicide group.

No differences in terms of:

• Whether they had been in contact with their general practitioner in the past 3 months
• Whether they had been diagnosed with a mental or physical illness
• Whether or not others perceived them to have an undiagnosed mental illness
• Indications of suicidality
• Occurrence of specific stressful life events.
Method unknown for eight undetermined deaths

In line with Scottish national suicide statistics most common method across both groups was hanging/ligature strangulation (59%) followed by overdose/poisoning (11%).

But missing-suicide group were no more likely to have died by hanging/ligature strangulation (50%) than those in the other-suicide group (62%)

Drowning appears to occur at a higher frequency for the missing-suicide group (sample size too small)
Across the whole sample:
- 65% were found at their own residence,
- 24% in a natural outdoor location (e.g., beaches, woods, rivers, parks and golf-courses)
- 11% in other locations (e.g., place of work, railway line, hotel room).

No difference between groups in terms of whether they were located in rural or urban areas

Other-suicides - more likely at the home address
Missing-suicides - more likely natural outdoor locations
Distances travelled

• **Missing-suicides likely away from home** (72% v. 42%)

• Missing-suicides: 0 km to 904 km (mean 32.05 km) • Other-suicides: 0 km to 805 km (mean 12.99 km)

• **BUT** – 98% of the whole sample travelled no more than 60 km!!

• Four people travelled considerably further (one missing-suicide at 904 km) and three other-suicides found at 268 km, 276 km and 805 km).

• Missing-suicide group mean 7.14 km
  • Other-suicide group mean 2.07 km

Missing-suicides travelled further
• **Other-suicides** more likely to be found by *someone within their social or daily living network* (82%) than the missing-suicide group (17%)

• **Missing-suicides** more likely than other-suicides to be found by individuals in *official search or public protection roles* (36% vs. 4%) or members of public (47% vs. 14%)
How they were found

- **Other-suicides** more likely than the missing-suicide group to be found as a result of someone inadvertently coming across the body (73% v. 44%) or as a result of family/friends actively searching (14% vs. 0%)

- **Missing-suicide group** more likely to be found as a result of an active police search (53% vs 3%)

- Despite being recorded as missing to police and actively searched for, 44% of the missing-suicide group were not found as a result of the police search but were found inadvertently by someone coming across the body.
Timescales: last seen to found

• Missing-suicides mean duration 34 days (s.d. = 108.53)
• Other-suicides mean duration 1.25 days (s.d. = 3.41)

• BUT 98% of the whole sample were located within 46 days
• 3 missing-suicides much longer - 141, 349 and 555 days

• Missing-suicides mean duration 5.3 days (s.d. = 9.44)
• Other-suicides mean duration 1.25 days (s.d. = 3.41)
Absence of epidemiological or sociodemographic differences

- No epidemiological or sociodemographic differences
- Missing-suicide group likely to be slightly older
- We should not view suicidal individuals who are reported missing as clinically different from suicidal individuals not reported missing.
Complex interplay between suicide location and being found

- **Other-suicides**: at home (location where there is regular footfall) and someone naturally/inadvertently comes across them as part of daily routines before anyone has considered them as ‘missing’ from their expected social obligations.

- **Missing-suicides** are ‘missed by someone’ as they are not located where they are expected to be. Immediate cursory searching by fails to locate them as they are more likely to be in natural outdoor locations and harder to find without an organised, systematic police-led search.

- Missing-suicides located in particularly unexpected locations or well concealed may results in the police-led search being inconclusive / the person may subsequently being found inadvertently by a member of the public) sometime after report.

- We need to increase the rate at which individuals are located by police and suitably trained professionals.
Observed differences relate to whether the individual is ‘missed’ by someone within their social circle and the circumstances surrounding the death in terms of how difficult they are to find based on a combination of unusualness of location, distance from home and level of concealment.

Bigger sample size for more in-depth analysis

Research in different jurisdictions – context / geography

Inform police risk assessment of suicide in missing person cases and to support both the investigation and search response in such cases
Thank you

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