

Police overhaul of missing persons cases 'could put children at risk'

An overhaul of how police deal with missing people could put vulnerable children at risk of being groomed and sexually exploited, the NSPCC has said.



The reforms are being brought in after nine men were jailed in May last year for grooming and abusing vulnerable teenage girls in Rochdale

By Wesley Johnson, Home Affairs Correspondent

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Officers will no longer be sent to one in three missing persons cases where the child is assessed as “absent”, as opposed to “missing”, to stop them being used as a collection service for children who run away from care homes.

The aim is to free up officers' time and to improve the way forces deal with children who repeatedly go missing from care and might fall prey to sexual abuse.

But David Tucker, head of policy at the NSPCC, said: "We are very concerned that the new definition of 'missing persons' will put vulnerable children at risk of being groomed and sexually exploited.

“Children go missing for a variety of reasons; they may be bullied, abused or are generally unhappy. But whatever the reason, this problem must be taken seriously.

“We expect all professionals including the police to invest the right amount of time and take the necessary action to protect all children as soon as they go missing.”

Under the plans, call handlers will class missing persons cases as either "absent", when a person simply does not arrive where they are expected to be, or "missing", where there is a specific reason for concern.

This could be that the disappearance is out of character or that they may be at risk of harm.

Around a third of missing people cases are likely to be classed as "absent", meaning officers would not attend, pilot schemes in the Greater Manchester, West Midlands and Staffordshire force areas showed.

Pat Geenty, the lead for missing people for the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO), said: "Whenever we get a call and someone is reported missing, we would normally dispatch a police officer, irrespective of the circumstances of the case.

“So you see that's a huge demand on police resources.”

Officers deal with around 327,000 reports of missing people per year, the equivalent of around 900 per day, of which two in three involve children.

However, officers are sometimes being used as a "collection service" for children who go missing from care homes, Mr Geenty added.

"What we're asking for now is that the care homes act as responsible parents, do the initial work that's required in terms of trying to find out where the missing individual is, and then if they have concerns to ring the police.

"There is an element about reducing bureaucracy, but I am convinced that the change will enable us to focus resources to protect those children that we need to protect."

The reforms are being brought in after nine men were jailed in May last year for grooming and abusing vulnerable teenage girls in Rochdale.

A report by the Rochdale Borough Safeguarding Children Board painted a picture of girls as young as 10 being targeted for sexual abuse having been written off by those in authority who said they believed the children were "making their own choices" and "engaging in consensual sexual activity".

Peter Davies, the ACPO lead for child protection, said: "In a number of cases there is a link between children going missing, often repeatedly, sometimes more than once a day, and being

subjected to sexual exploitation and other forms of harm.

"What that tells us is that the previous approach to this left something out.

"There's a very simple message here which is that we are learning lessons from the last two years and we're trying to improve the performance in identifying, understanding and managing the risks to vulnerable children and young people."

Jo Youle, chief executive of the Missing People charity, said: "Regardless of whether the police classify a child or young person as missing or as absent, it must be recognised that there is always a wider safeguarding issue."

Checks on any emerging patterns were also needed to identify potential risks, she added.