

Ambiguous loss research



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About this research



Our purpose

Ambiguous loss is the unique and complex type of grief that loved ones of missing persons experience. It's different to standard grief as it is a continual loss. This complicates and delays the grieving process, causing unresolved grief.

Most counsellors in Australia aren't equipped to support people living with this unique form of grief, and the issue of ambiguous loss is one that is not yet well accepted and understood by the public.

We want to better understand the public perception of ambiguous loss to assist us in bringing awareness to this issue and ensuring the necessary support is available.

Our objective

With this research we aimed to gain insight on what proportion of the general population in Australia:

- has heard the term ambiguous loss
- understands the meaning of ambiguous loss
- has experienced ambiguous loss, or knows someone who has
- knows of available support services relating to ambiguous loss
- has heard of MPAN and our work in the Missing Persons space.

Our method

With support from SenateSHJ's Insights team and Take2 research we surveyed a total sample of 1,000 Australians aged 18 plus.

The sample resembled the Australian population in terms of gender, age, state and location.

Participants were surveyed between 7-11 November 2022.

Herein we present the key findings along with the detailed results from the survey.

The full survey can be found in the appendix of this report.

Our findings



Key insights

Only **8%** of those surveyed had heard of ambiguous loss with 25–34 year-olds most aware of the term

15% have personally experienced ambiguous loss, with **14%** knowing someone else who has

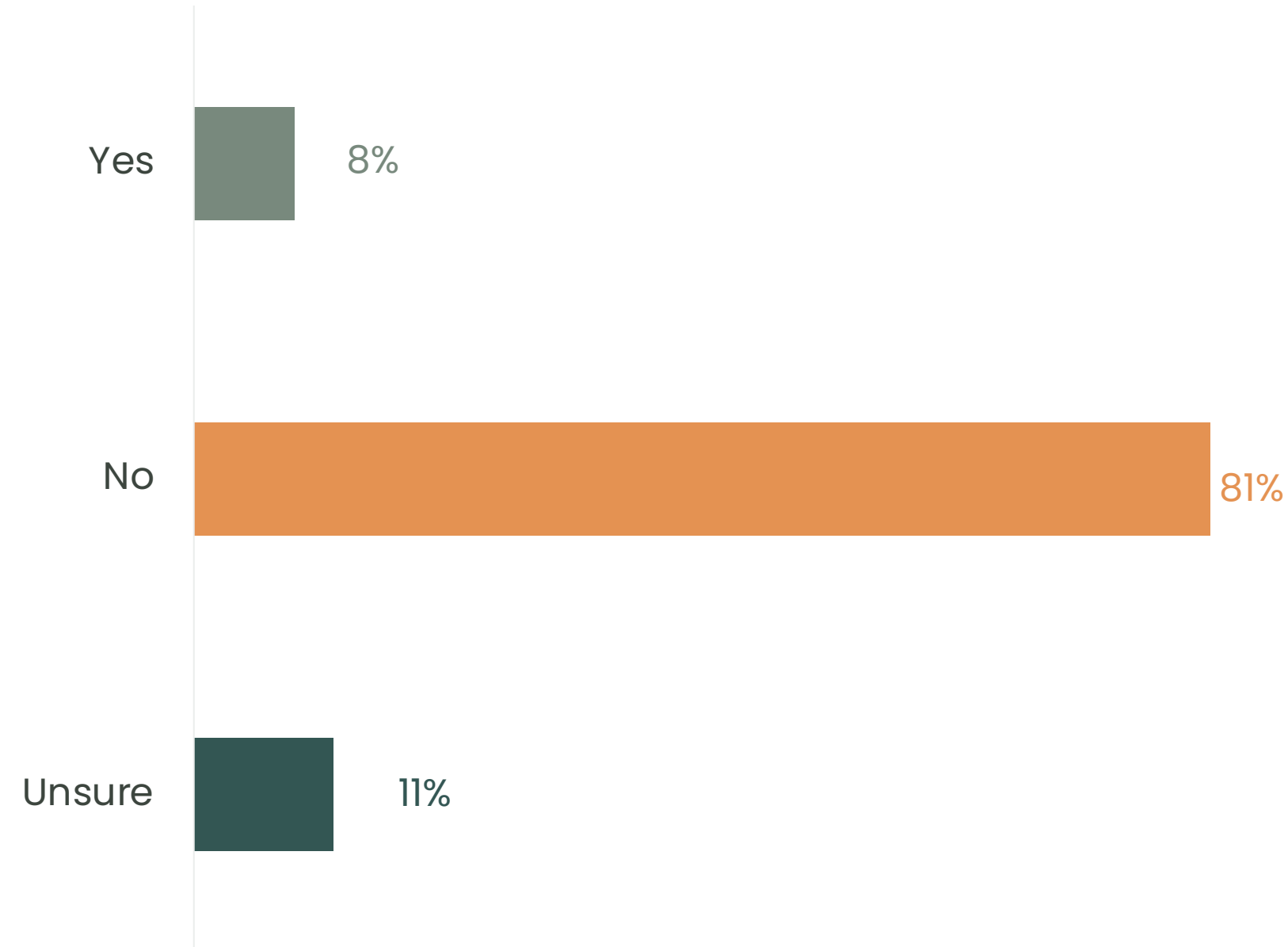
When experiencing ambiguous loss, the majority would seek support from family and friends

Most feel the responsibility of providing emotional support for those impacted by long term missing persons should sit with community support groups and charitable organisations including MPAN

9% have previously heard of the Missing Persons Advocacy Network, with this value reaching **13%** in 18–24 year-olds

Awareness of MPAN was mostly achieved via traditional and social media channels

Q1 Have you ever heard the term ambiguous loss?



- Just 8% of those surveyed were confident they had heard the term ambiguous loss before
- 25–34 year-olds were most aware of the term ambiguous loss with 17% having heard the term before
- 65+ year-olds were least aware with only 3% having heard the term before
- Awareness of the term ambiguous loss did not vary significantly between states other than Western Australia, where only 3% had heard the term before

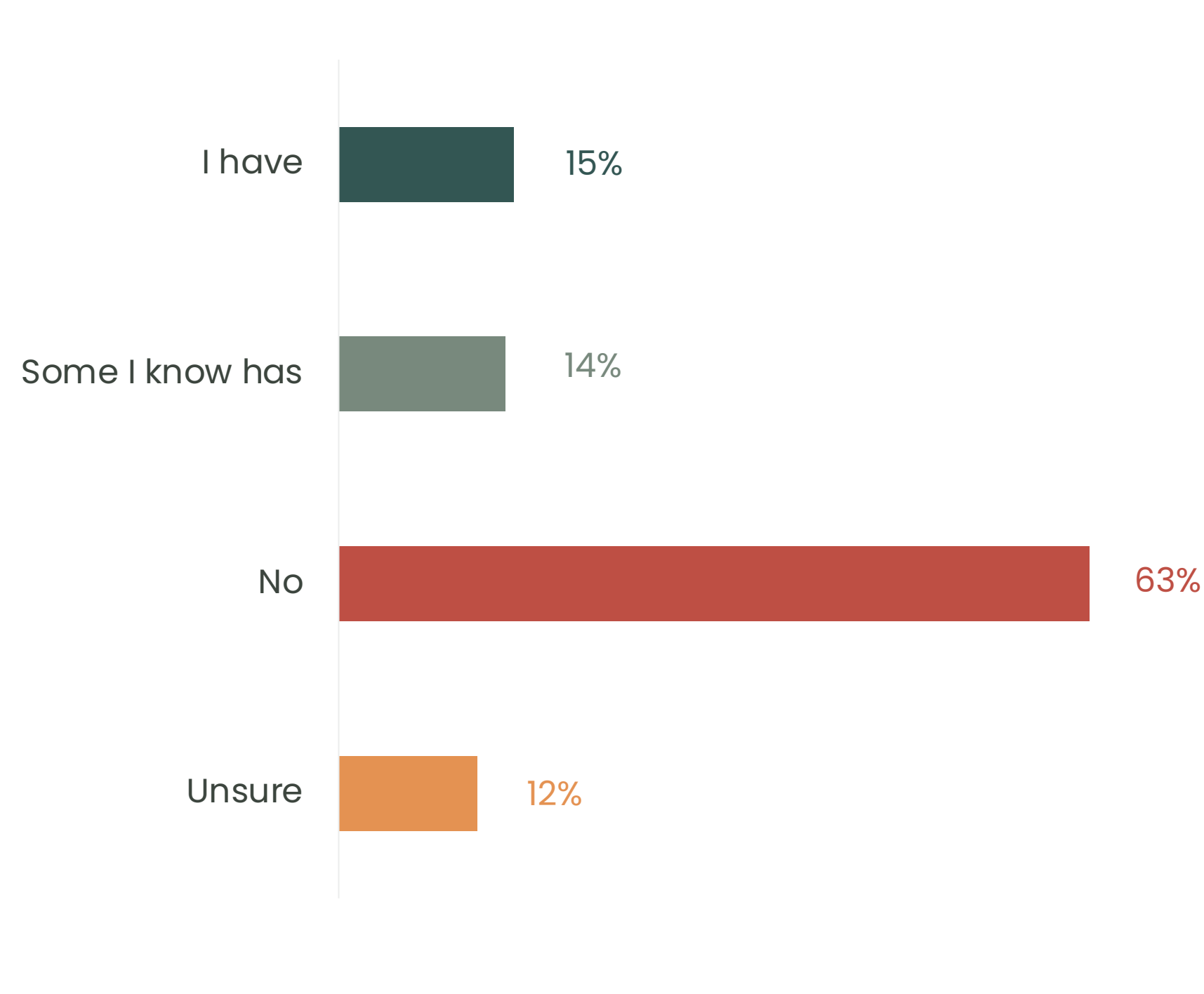
Q2 What does the term ambiguous loss mean to you?

significant undefined
likelihood death unsure
COVID-19
understanding emotional
unexplained no closure
grief closure
sense of loss unquantifiable
dementia unresolved
unclear
unknown cause

Excluding the words 'ambiguous' and 'loss', the following themes were the most commonplace:

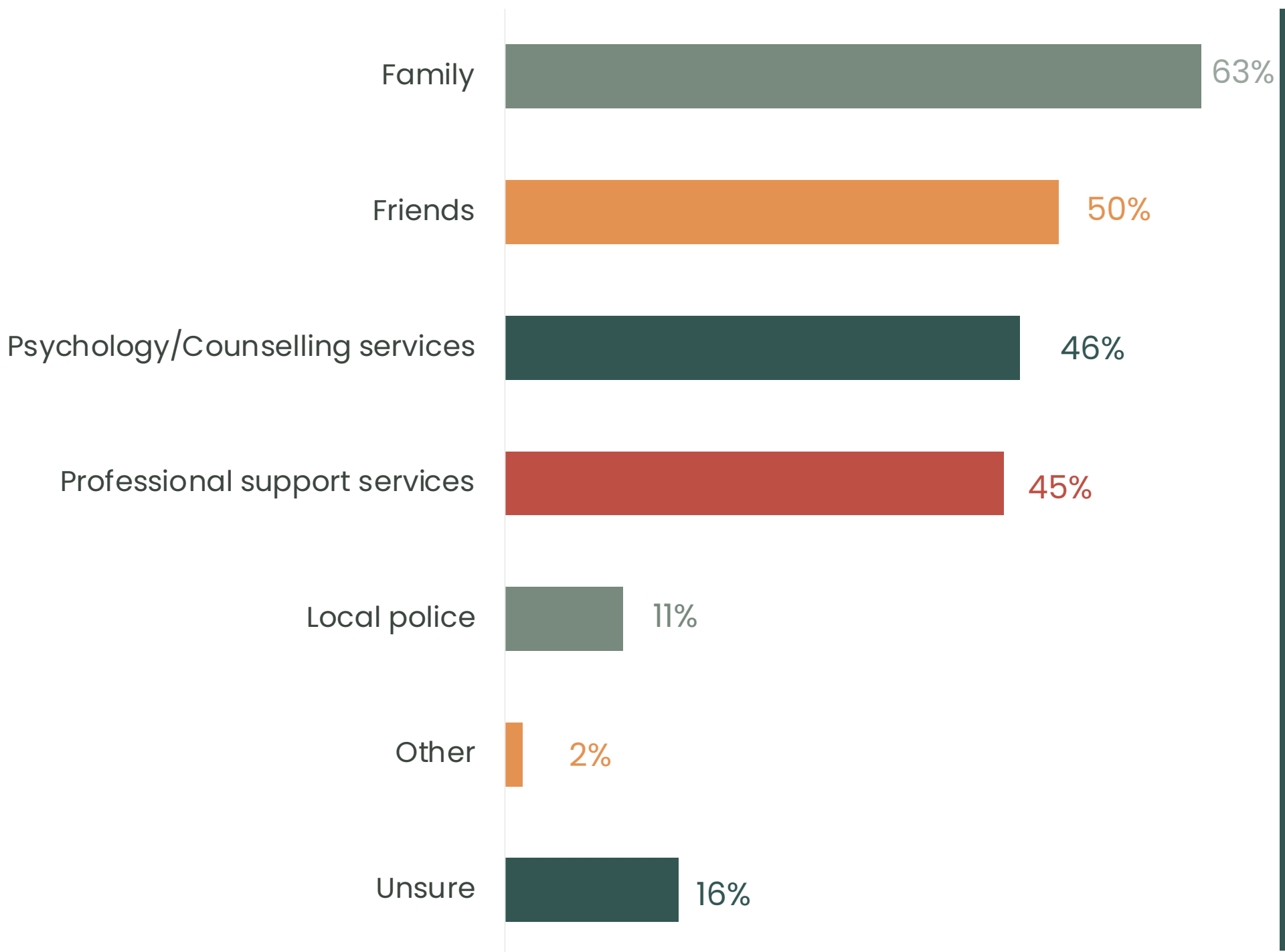
- No closure, conclusion or resolution
- Loss that is undefined, unexplainable or without specific cause
- Relation to grief or death
- An unquantifiable loss
- Relation to the pandemic or COVID-19
- Relation to loss of memory or dementia

Q3 Have you, or someone you know, ever experienced ambiguous loss?



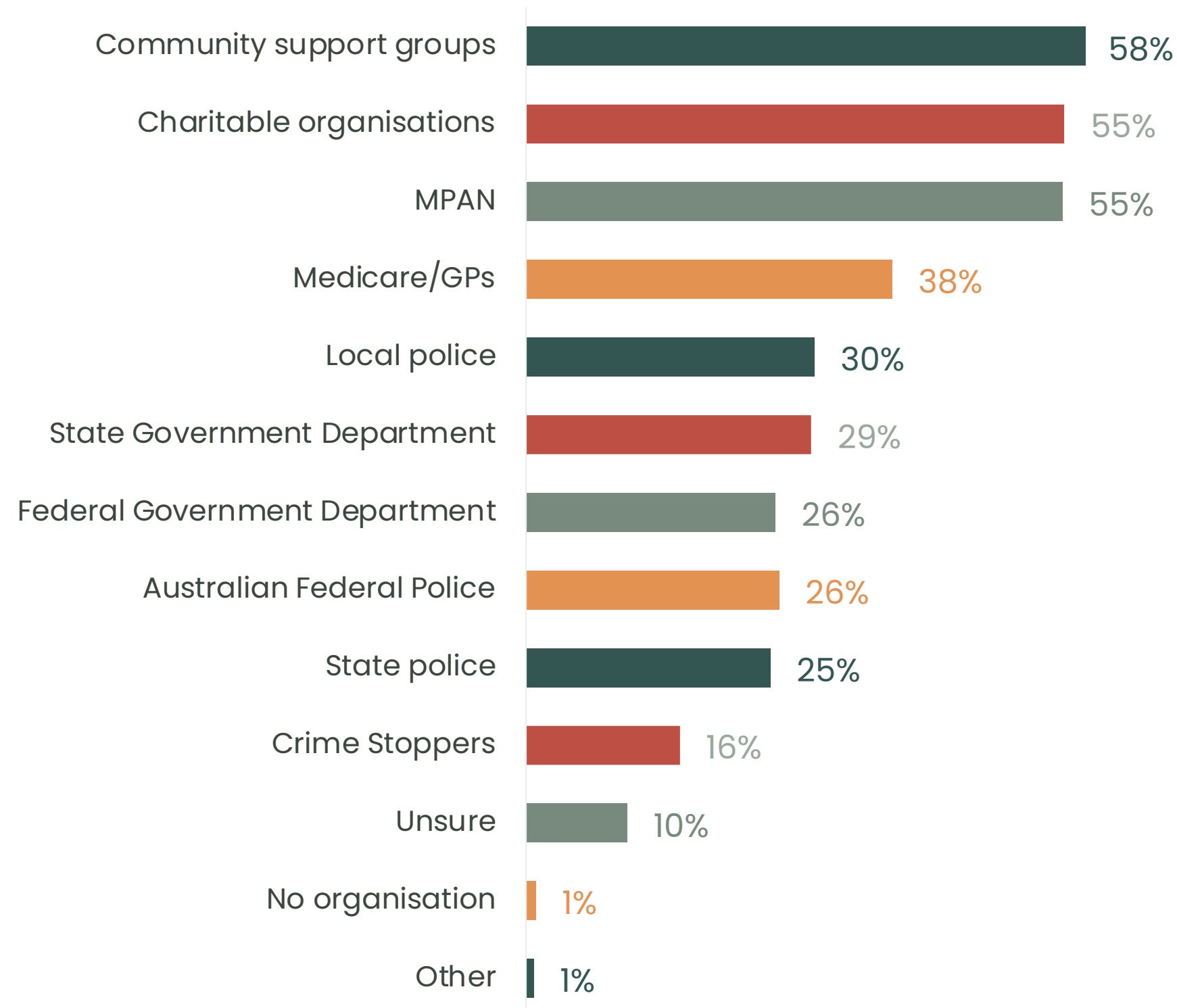
- 15% of those surveyed have personally experienced ambiguous loss
- 14% of those surveyed know someone else who has experienced ambiguous loss
- The number of people aged 65+ who have or know someone who has experienced ambiguous loss was significantly lower with 74% answering no
- Significantly more people aged 25–34 know of someone who has experienced ambiguous loss, 23%

Q4 Where would you seek support from when experiencing ambiguous loss?



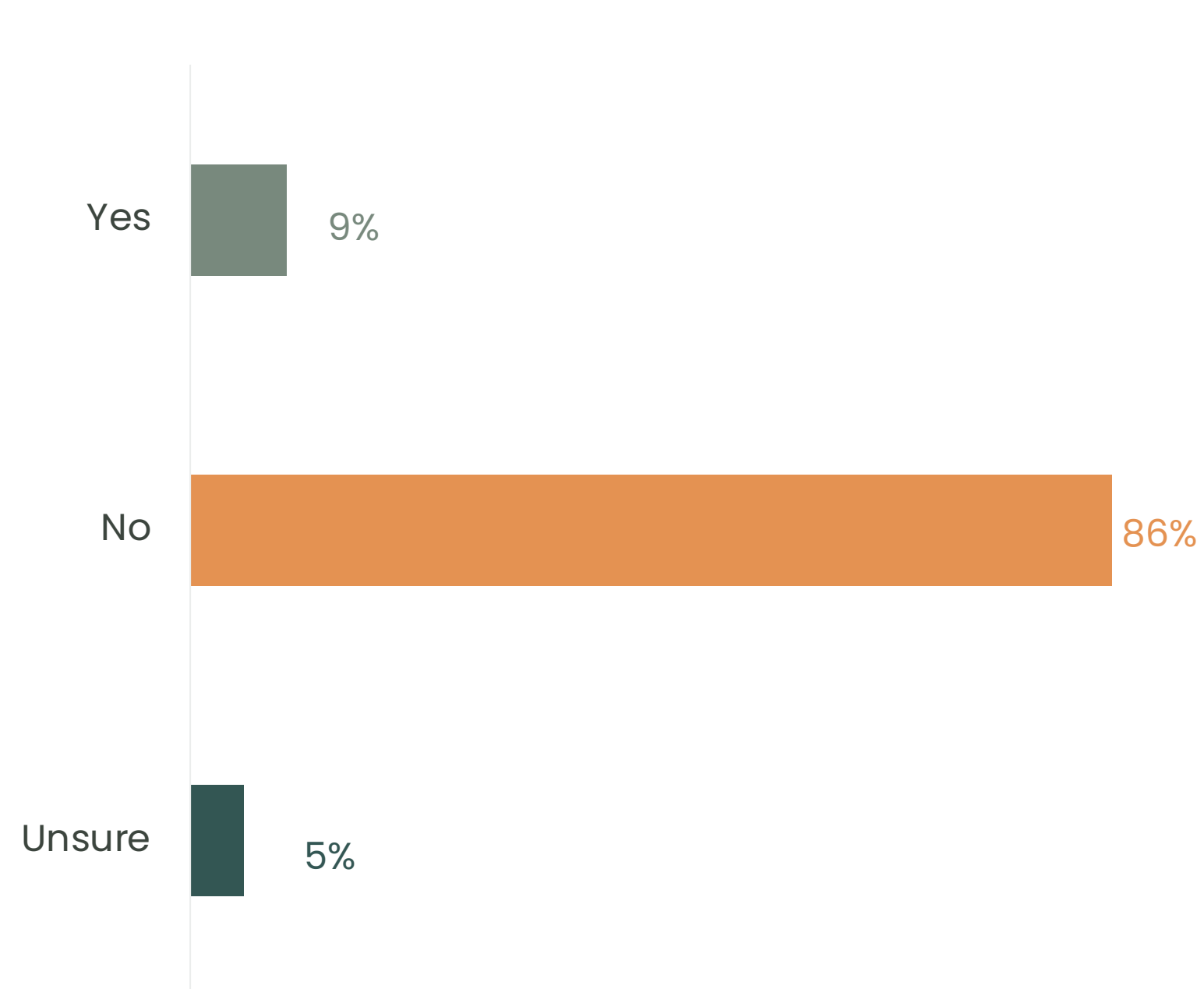
- The majority of those surveyed would seek support from family and friends when experiencing ambiguous loss
- Almost half would also use professional support services such as BeyondBlue, Lifeline, Good Grief, Griefline etc., and psychology or counselling services
- Only 11% of those surveyed would seek support from local police
- At 52%, females were significantly more likely to seek support from psychology/counselling services than men
- At just 29%, 18-24 year-olds would be significantly less likely to seek support from professional support services compared to 55% of those aged 65+

Q5 Who do you believe should be responsible for providing emotional support to those who are impacted by long-term missing persons?



- The majority of those surveyed feel the responsibility should sit with community support groups and charitable organisations including MPAN
- These bodies also ranked significantly higher among females and those aged over 65
- Over a quarter of those surveyed also thought responsibility should sit with local state and federal police and government
- These bodies ranked significantly higher among 18-24 year-olds

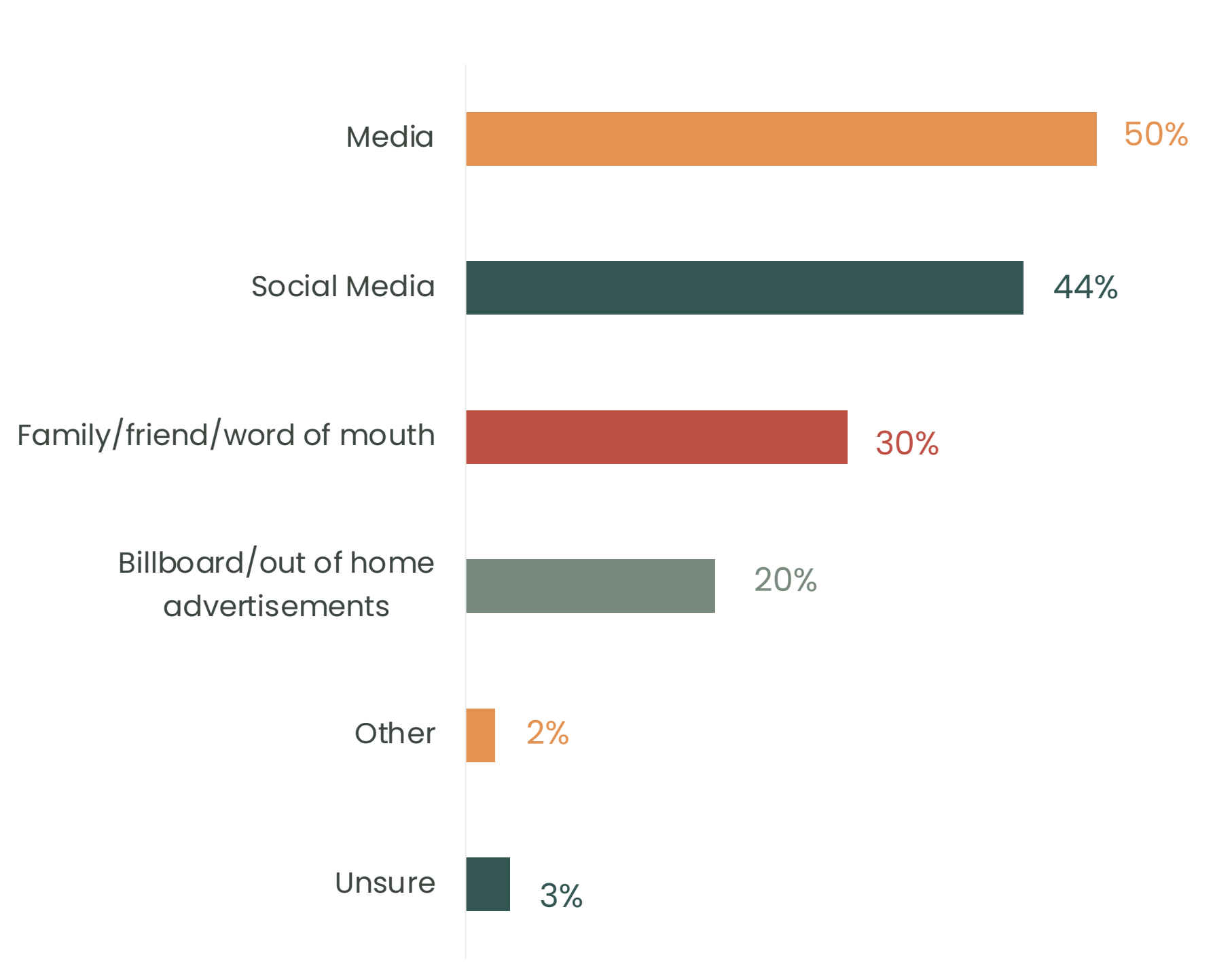
Q6 Before today, had you heard of MPAN?



9% of the population have previously heard of Missing Persons Advocacy Network (MPAN), with this value reaching 13% in 18-24 year-olds.

This is a much higher value than we had expected.

Q7 How did you become aware of MPAN?



Half of those aware of Missing Persons Advocacy Network (MPAN) became aware via media, with 44% also highlighting social media as a channel

Appendix



Our survey

This set of questions is about ambiguous loss.

Q1 Before today, have you ever heard the term ambiguous loss?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

Q2 What does the term ambiguous loss mean to you?

For the purpose of this research, we provide a general definition of ambiguous loss and a more specific definition relating to missing persons.

General definition of ambiguous loss: Ambiguous loss is a loss that occurs without a significant likelihood of reaching emotional closure or a clear understanding. This kind of loss leaves a person searching for answers, and thus complicates and delays the process of grieving, and often results in unresolved grief.

Definition of ambiguous loss relating to missing persons: Ambiguous loss is the unique and complex type of grief that loved ones of missing persons experience. Some psychologists consider to be one of the most traumatic kinds of loss, and most unmanageable form of stress. It's different to standard grief (where the loss can naturally become easier to cope with over time), as it is a continual loss.

Q3 Taking the above definitions into consideration, have you, or someone you know, ever experienced ambiguous loss? Please select all that apply

- Yes, I have
- Yes, someone I know has
- No, neither myself or someone I know has
- Unsure

Q4 Considering the definition of ambiguous loss provided, which, if any, of the following sources would you seek support from when experiencing ambiguous loss? Please select all that apply

- Family
- Friends
- Professional support services (i.e. BeyondBlue, Lifeline, Good Grief, Griefline etc.)
- Psychology / Counselling services
- Local police / law enforcement
- No support was sought
- Other support (please specify)
- Unsure

Missing Persons is a growing issue in Australia with an average of 145 people being reported missing each day. Only 1-2% of these are related to suspicious circumstances and more often are related to mental health. Around 95% of missing people are found within a week; the rest go on to become long term missing (missing beyond 3 months).

Q5 Which, if any, of the following organisations do you believe should be responsible for providing emotional support to those who are impacted by long-term missing persons? Please select all that apply

- Australian Federal Police
- State police
- Local police
- Crime Stoppers
- Federal Government Department
- State Government Department
- Missing Persons Advocacy Network (MPAN)
- Community support groups
- Charitable organisations (i.e. BeyondBlue, Lifeline, Good Grief, Griefline etc.)
- Medicare/GPs
- No organisation should be responsible
- Another organisation (please specify)
- Unsure

The Missing Persons Advocacy Network (MPAN) was founded in 2013 by Loren O'Keeffe after the disappearance of her brother Dan, and the support the 'Dan Come Home' garnered from people across Australia. MPAN has since been responsible for campaigns such as The Unmissables, Invisible Friends and Missed Birthdays.

Q6 Before today, had you heard of the Missing Persons Advocacy Network (MPAN)?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

Q7 If yes, how did you become aware of the Missing Persons Advocacy Network (MPAN)?

- Media (TV, radio, print etc.)
- Social media
- Family/friend/word of mouth
- Billboard/out of home advertisements
- Other (please specify)
- Unsure

Thank you

MISSING PERSONS ADVOCACY NETWORK
Level 10, 303 Collins Street, Melbourne VIC 300
mpan.com.au

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