

MPAN - Cost of Missingness Report

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|--|----|
| Executive Summary | 2 |
| Introduction | 3 |
| Whitepaper Scope | 3 |
| Problem Statement | 3 |
| Causes of Missingness | 3 |
| Intentional | 3 |
| Decision to Leave | 4 |
| Drifted | 4 |
| Unintentional | 4 |
| Lost or Wandered | 4 |
| Lack of Understanding | 4 |
| Missingness Impact | 5 |
| Individuals/Loved Ones | 5 |
| Economic Impacts | 5 |
| Social Impacts | 5 |
| Public Sector | 6 |
| Police | 6 |
| Psychological services (government funded) | 7 |
| Healthcare | 8 |
| Welfare (social payments) | 8 |
| Legal services | 9 |
| Private Sector | 9 |
| Employment | 9 |
| Further Recommendations | 10 |
| Individuals & Loved Ones | 10 |
| Police | 10 |
| Psychological Services | 10 |
| Welfare | 11 |
| Legal Services | 11 |
| Employment | 11 |

Executive Summary

This white paper seeks to explore the ingrained complexities of missingness and illustrate its current financial impact on Australian society - drawing upon first-hand survey findings and financial modelling results to highlight the underestimated severity of this issue in affecting the public and private sectors, and individuals alike. Despite the massive burden inflicted upon many individuals as a result of more than 38,000 annual disappearances in Australia alone, there is still a lack of knowledge and awareness amongst members of the general public about the untold damage left behind on society when an individual goes missing.

Although missingness is often presumed to be linked to suspicious causes, non-suspicious cases are heavily underrepresented in mainstream media - both in situations where individuals intentionally decide to leave or drift, and those involving individuals who have unintentionally wandered or experienced a lack of understanding. This discrepancy has been found to be particularly true for intentional missingness - which, although makes up the majority of all missingness cases in Australia, is still often overlooked as a potential root cause behind such occurrences.

Based on relevant contextual information collected, a financial model was created as a medium to convey the impact of missingness - detailing the costs and consequent impact that have resulted from cases and how they have affected different segments of Australian society at this point in time. It has been revealed that the public sector, private sector, as well as individuals and loved ones, have confronted an overall approximate cost of \$30.9m, \$211.3m and \$14.1m respectively in response to missingness cases all around Australia.

With costs sitting at greatly substantial amounts – particularly those incurred by the private sector – it is evident that missingness is a serious matter that leaves behind significantly grave impacts and as such, should be given greater importance and recognition in the sphere of social issues. It is anticipated that increased support from the government and public will help raise awareness of the severity of this issue and how people are consequently affected by it.

Introduction

Whitepaper Scope

This paper aims to illustrate the complexity of the impact and cost of missingness in Australia. It executes this through examining the current impact of missingness across three key groups of stakeholders: individuals and loved ones who are directly impacted by the missing person's disappearance, the public sector and the private sector. In examining how each specific stakeholder has been impacted, the complexity of missingness is illustrated with impact and cost often interrelated between each distinct group of stakeholders. The paper illustrates that the current impact of missingness is one of significant economic cost with a total annual cost to all stakeholders estimated at \$266,365,365.80.

It should be acknowledged that the paper's scope is concerned with examining the current impact of missingness on Australian society. As a result, the scope of this whitepaper does not extend to examining the historical cost of missingness but rather it intends to illustrate the continued relevance and impact that missingness has in the present moment. The paper therefore examines how missingness remains a complex, costly and meaningful problem for Australian society.

Problem Statement

The severity and impact of individuals going missing has been underrepresented and inconsistently available to the Australian government & public. This leads to a general lack of understanding amongst stakeholders, perpetuating the issue that the cost of missingness is not accurately recognised amongst individuals and loved ones, the public sector and private sector. Therefore, the urgent requirement for additional support and providing assistance to those affected by this issue is misconceived.

Causes of Missingness

Missingness is often interpreted as an issue that is primarily tied to crime and mental illness. Whilst suspicious causes of missingness tend to be overrepresented in the media, this paper will explore the non-suspicious causes of missingness that are often under the radar.

Causes of non-suspicious missingness can be split up into intentional and unintentional as per the missing continuum developed by Biehal, Mitchell and Wade (2003).

Intentional

Intentional missingness can be interpreted as individuals who have voluntarily decided to break contact of their own free will. Out of the two subcategories, the majority of the missing persons population in Australia are classified as intentionally missing despite media representation often being centred on the unintentionally missing.

Within intentional missingness are those who make the conscious choice to leave and go missing and a second group of missing persons who decide to drift.

Decision to Leave

Of the intentionally missing adult population, the first primary group is those who decide to leave. In this scenario, the individual does not inform either their family or close affiliates and this could be due to tension between these parties. Such tension can be linked to underlying familial, financial or psychological factors. It has been found that of the missing adult population, 64% went voluntarily missing due to factors such as relationship breakdown, family and domestic violence, financial difficulties or to attempt suicide (Bricknell 2017).

Drifted

The second group to consider within the intentionally missing adult population are those who have drifted. Of this group, individuals actively choose to leave and not return but do not consciously register it as an intention to break contact or go missing. This can occur within those who lead a transient lifestyle where the disappearance may be temporary but extended, and thus could be interpreted as an individual going missing to unknowing loved ones. 19% of the missing adult population are considered to have voluntarily drifted (Bricknell 2017).

In comparison, the causes for a young person who is intentionally missing can be linked to the stress of environmental factors such as their family or their school environment. Difficulties within the home environment including parental-child conflict, parental separation or situations of family and domestic violence can all contribute to a child's decision to actively leave of their own free will. Similarly, difficulties

within the school environment such as peer pressure or bullying could contribute to a young person intentionally becoming missing.

Unintentional

Unintentional Missingness constitutes individuals that have become lost, wandered or are unaware that they are missing and not out of free will. Biehal, Mitchell and Wade's study found that out of their sample group 16% went unintentionally missing, becoming the smaller portion of the 2 categories of missingness (Bricknell 2017).

Lost or Wandered

Unintentional Missingness resulting in an individual being lost can be attributed to a significant event occurring (e.g. natural disaster) or during recreational pursuits (e.g. fishing, bushwalking). Unlike intentional missingness, individuals have not willingly made the decision to go missing and the identification is dependent on individuals being reported or self-reported to the police.

Lack of Understanding

This subcategory is correlated with an individual becoming lost or wandering off, but differs in that the underlying cause is due to a lack of understanding. This specifically represents individuals with dementia or an intellectual disability.

Dementia is defined as 'affecting the thinking, behaviour and the ability to perform everyday tasks' and can present symptoms such as memory loss. Dementia Australia reports that often causes individuals with this condition to have difficulty finding their way home and can also cause individuals to have a higher propensity to wander. Individuals with this condition are therefore at risk of going missing. They also reported in 2017, that on average in NSW 12,000 individuals go missing annually and 1 in 10 of these individuals may have a form of dementia.

Missingness Impact

Individuals/Loved Ones

When assessing the impact of missingness, it is important to consider how a missing person's disappearance affects those who directly knew the person - that is individuals or loved ones of the missing person. Impacts on these individuals were subclassified into impact in the form of economic costs and social costs that arose in responding to the missing person's disappearance. The total individual out-of-pocket cost factoring in economic impacts and social impacts were

Economic Impacts

Economic impact was a consideration of how individuals had been financially impacted by the missing person's disappearance in regards to funds allocated to the search and loss of income related to their employment. The funds and income lost were also assessed in relation to the extent of financial impact that individuals experienced. It is important to note that the time horizon spent in relation to the search of the missing individual also impacted & continues to impact the level of financial loss experienced by individuals and loved ones.

Search efforts are a complex and unique cost to individuals and loved ones facing missingness as it entails out-of-pocket costs including accommodation and travel that may or may not be continually

growing depending if the missing individual has been found or not. Specifically looking at long term impacted individuals, it is estimated that in the Australian public, \$702,000 is spent in total on accommodation and \$475,675 is spent on travel. The total out-of-pocket spending for long-term individuals in search efforts averages to be \$1,177,677 in the Australian public. 70% of participants also advised that they would have allocated more money on search efforts if they had received access to it. This is highly significant as it highlights the necessity of additional funding that would reduce the financial impact experienced by individuals and loved ones.

In regards to the potential income loss related to the employment of the individual or loved ones of the missing individual, this specifically looked at the loss of working hours that may have been dedicated to search efforts and personal grievances. The estimated lost financial earnings varied between respondents but generally was less than \$1,000 - however, some were shown to be severely impacted with the most extreme cases estimating a loss of over \$20,000 in earnings due to leave from their occupation. The extreme cases can be attributed due to factors such as lack of entitlement to paid leave & frictional unemployment. The total amount of income lost or forgone for long term impacted individuals in Australia was calculated by the number of individuals likely to be impacted by missingness in Australia & the percentage of impacted individuals likely to have stopped working, is averaged at \$3,785,877. This figure highlights the severity of the economic impact that individuals and loved ones can directly face.

Social Impacts

Within social impacts, individuals were surveyed to assess to what extent the missing person's disappearance had in causing a negative quality of life impact. The WHO defines an individual's quality of life as "an individual's perception of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns. It is a broad ranging concept affected in a complex way by the person's physical health, psychological state, personal beliefs, social relationships and their relationship to salient features of their environment" (WHO, 1999).

As such, individuals and loved ones were assessed in regards to their sleep routine, diet, hygiene, maintenance of health, productivity at work and their frequency of social interactions following the disappearance. Respondents generally experienced a high level of disruption across sleep & lowest level of disruption across their hygiene. 82% of survey respondents also reported decreased frequency of social interactions following the disappearance and negative experiencing of social withdrawal. The associated costs with sleep, due to decreased productivity and increased absenteeism, is calculated to be \$2,938,627 in total. The costs associated with social withdrawal, due to premature death potentially caused by isolation, is averaged to be \$773,323 in the Australian public. Therefore the total cost of psychological problems for long term impacted individuals was \$3,711,951. This is a statistically significant figure as it emphasises the high level of social impact caused by missingness, in terms of cost, faced by the Australian Public.

Public Sector

Apart from costs associated with family members and other loved ones, the disappearance of a missing person is also bound to carry costs to be incurred by the public sector. Government services such as the police force, healthcare, psychological support, welfare and legal help are amongst various components of the public sector that are often financially affected as a result of such occurrences.

Police

The time and cost associated with the use of police and other specialists who are employed to locate a missing person imposes a major impact on the public sector. It was discovered that the annual average cost inflicted upon the police force approximates to a massive amount of \$16,215,576 - as categorised into the hourly cost of their services, and the hourly cost of any transportation required.

With an estimated number of 38,000 missing-person cases dealt by the police annually, 93.2% of this figure is made up of short-term missingness cases that make up around 35,400 of the annual estimate. The remaining 6.8% comprises around 2,600 long-term missingness cases investigated by the police every year. Despite this imbalance in relative proportions, the overall costs to police of long-term missingness still greatly outweigh those associated with cases that are more short-term in nature.

The time invested into searching for a missing person by the police largely depends on the type of case at hand - with short-term cases requiring approximately 2 hours each, and long-term cases requiring approximately 100 hours each. With an average hourly cost of \$39.42 for the provision of services by the police force, the total cost to police annually as a result of investigating the disappearances of missing persons in Australia has been estimated to be \$13,040,136.

Apart from the costs directly associated with the services provided, the police also need to incur transportation costs when investigating a missing-person case. At an estimated hourly cost of \$26.20 for police transportation, this figure is bound to be incurred for every short-term missingness case (estimated to require 1 hour of transportation), and 33 times the amount for every long-term missingness case (estimated to require 33 hours of transportation). From this, it can be deduced that every year, a total of 121,200 hours, or \$3,175,440, is spent on police transportation annually.

The figures associated with the impact left on police as a result of both short-term and long-term missingness cases adequately reflect the significant cost that police are required to incur - whether in financial terms, or with regards to valuable time that could be spent on other duties that may arise. Yet, based on the information provided by respondents to the survey, more than half did not engage in the employment of additional specialists other than the police in order to assist in specifically investigating the missing-person case at hand. Particularly for long-term missingness cases that disproportionately affect the police force despite making up a small portion of total cases annually, this may signal an inherent need for the public sector to provide greater financial or advisory support to individuals being affected by a missing-person case that lasts longer than some specified period of time - such that they are able to actively seek ways to gain additional assistance via third-party specialists instead of requiring general community police to deter themselves from other duties and obligations that may arise during the process of searching for a missing person.

Psychological services (government funded)

The disappearance of a missing person is a traumatic event that causes significant and ongoing psychological distress for loved ones who are left behind. It has been found that those who are affected by the disappearance of a missing person are at increased susceptibility to conditions such as prolonged grief disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder and major depressive disorder where relief may be found when engaging in treatment such as cognitive behavioural therapy (Lenferink et al. 2018). However due to it being seen as a priority to locate and return the missing person, not enough resources are often allocated to treating the affected loved one's psychological needs in the initial period after the disappearance beyond being given telephone numbers to call for support (Wayland 2007).

Despite there being signs of engagement in psychological services by those affected by a missing person's disappearance, there is often a financial barrier which leads to a discrepancy between the number of sessions an individual required compared to the number attended. In fact a majority of survey respondents expressed an interest in receiving more psychological sessions than they were currently receiving but despite the assistance of external financial support, out of pocket costs were still borne which could limit further access to support. Our financial model estimated that 7,800 people are impacted by a missing person's disappearance and predicted to engage in psychological services yet only 0.50% do.

Overall, the average number of sessions that survey respondents attended was 4 however there were large discrepancies in the amount and frequency of sessions. One respondent noted that they had attended around 200 sessions altogether. Survey respondents who did attend psychological sessions stated that the out of pocket cost was between \$55 to \$200 each session, which accumulated can be significant. It should also be recognised that some respondents did not attend any psychological services. Of those, there was an even split in those who wanted to access psychological services but were unable to and those who did not feel the need to attend at all.

Existing forms of financial support that were accessed include the Mental Health Care Plan where up to 10 counselling sessions can be received in a calendar year and covered by a Medicare rebate. Financial support where the cost of counselling was subsidised was also offered by the Family and Friends Missing Person Unit, a subsection of the NSW Government's Department of Communities and Justice. Overall, the current financial burden on the government in offering financial support for psychological services to those affected by missingness is an average of \$120 per impacted individual. Altogether, the current estimated annual cost that is borne by the government in supporting impacted loved one's access to psychological services is \$1,872,000. Overall however, there still needs to be more progress with financial support for loved ones to validate the difficulty in coping with a missing person's disappearance as indicated by the census that receiving more psychological sessions is needed.

Healthcare

Whilst the psychological impact of a missing person's disappearance needs to be recognised, it is also important to acknowledge the impact that their disappearance has on the development or exacerbation of physical health issues experienced by affected loved ones (Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit 2014). This can subsequently result in the need for increased access to healthcare services and can increase the resource burden on both loved ones themselves and the healthcare sector, where financial support is offered by parties such as the government.

An estimated total of 114,000 people are impacted by a missing person's disappearance and of these, about 0.23% will engage in healthcare services. Survey respondents indicated a large variance in their expenditure on healthcare services related to the impact of a missing person's disappearance. On average, individuals affected by a missing person's disappearance were estimated to engage in 6 additional healthcare sessions per year. Of those who responded that they did engage in healthcare services, the maximum expenditure listed was a \$15,000 out of pocket cost from one respondent. Other respondents also listed their expenditure within the range of thousands of dollars. It should be recognised however that some respondents acknowledged that they felt there was no need for healthcare services in response to the missing person's disappearance.

On average, the government bore \$72.72 per impacted individual who used healthcare services. Access to financial support however was limited for survey respondents. It was primarily identified that the

standard rebate from Medicare for a bulk-billed GP visit acted as the main form of support but respondents often felt that this was inadequate. Currently, the annual cost to the healthcare sector is an estimated \$11,440,310.40 due to the direct or indirect impact of a missing person's disappearance on the need to seek healthcare services by affected loved ones. The cost whilst significant also still needs to factor into consideration how out-of-pocket costs for impacted loved ones can be more financially supported by the government, extending beyond the standard Medicare rebate offered.

Welfare (social payments)

Extending beyond government funding for healthcare and psychological services to help relieve financial hardships, families who are impacted by missing individuals may also need additional sources of cash flow to help them during the difficult situation. Under Australia's Social Security Act, the main form of welfare payments that are reflected within this report are from those who obtain JobSeeker payment which is provided to citizens who are currently looking for employment.

Data from the survey revealed that the majority of the participants do not receive income support payments from the government. The only exception within the responses being a parent receiving between \$200-\$490 per fortnight throughout the course of 2018-2019.

Whilst the data from the survey reveals that the minority of respondents actually received welfare payments, the annual cost of welfare in Australia can be estimated by multiplying the percentage of people that resigned and were eligible for welfare with the average JobSeeker payment amount which results in a total of \$1,396,165. This figure takes into account the average duration of frictional unemployment for an individual in Australia (14 weeks) to provide an accurate estimate.

Legal services

As reflected through the survey data, the impact of the disappearance of missing persons has a reduced impact on the legal sector, relative to other services offered by the public sector. A majority of survey respondents never utilised the legal system for a matter directly relating to the disappearance of their loved one. Due to a majority not having undertaken a case in court for the missing person, there were also thus minimal applications made for legal aid but applicants for legal aid were successful in gaining it. Of those who stated they had attended a court case in relation to the missing person, the most common legal case was engaging in a coronial inquest with these cases lasting about a day.

A majority stated they had not engaged in the use of any legal services. Some legal services were more commonly engaged with than others such as the hiring of legal personnel (lawyer, solicitor or barrister).

Other legal services that respondents mentioned engaging with include:

- Private investigators
- VCAT
- NSW Missing Person Unit
- Missing Person Register
- National Missing Persons Coordination Centre
- Family and Friends of Missing Person Unit

This thus challenges the common misconception that the disappearance of a missing person is often linked to criminal activity which usually implies follow up engagement with the legal system and its services.

The estimated value that individuals spend on legal services is deduced from considering the long term costs of hiring a legal service provider that was mentioned above. Long term hiring totaled \$2,845,403.

Private Sector

Employment

In the search for a missing person, associated individuals, families and/or loved ones, if employed, may take the decision to take leave from work to focus further efforts into the search or wellbeing reasons. Organisations within the private sector are therefore faced with costs associated with leave payments, decreased employee productivity and work performance, and resignation.

Taking this into consideration, it was calculated that based on the number of average number of individuals in Australia that obtain leave due to missingness, the average number of leave days utilised and the average cost of leave payment per day, and the total annual cost of leave payments facing the private sector on an annual basis is \$111,185,978.40.

Due to factors such as the time and effort required to search for the individual or for wellbeing reasons, many individuals may also decide to resign from the organisation that they were employed at. When an individual resigns, the associated costs to an organisation includes replacement hire recruitment & training costs ((ATD Releases 2016 State of the Industry Report, 2020). Taking these costs into consideration, it was calculated that the total average cost of impacted individuals withdrawing from their employer's organisation on an annual basis was \$122,408,222.14 for the private sector in Australia.

The effects of an individual taking leave from work or resigning to an organisation includes a loss of productivity & work performance. The total average cost of an unproductive employee annually in Australia was calculated on a basis of salary loss and percentage decrease in work productivity that employed, impacted individuals may face. This was calculated to be 98,897,001.84.

These costs provide a total cost to the private sector to be 211,305,223.98. The significant cost highlights how out-of-pocket costs for organisations can potentially be further supported by the government, providing further support for affected

Further Recommendations

The impact left behind on Australian society as a result of missingness cases at this point in time is undoubtedly grave and significant in amount - indicating an urgent need for additional support to be provided in helping those affected by such occurrences. The following recommendations have been devised in response to the findings discussed in this whitepaper:

Individuals & Loved Ones

By assessing the financial and social impact experienced by this sector, it can be seen there is a significant need to increase the support provided to affected individuals in order to alleviate any financial & psychological burdens. By alleviating these burdens, individuals will be able to dedicate more resources towards search efforts and ensure their personal wellbeing as well.

Police

It has been identified that there is an inherent need for an increase in financial and advisory support by the public sector in order to enable individuals affected by a long-term missingness case to benefit from easier access to third-party specialists specifically employed to assist the police in the process undergone when searching for a missing person.

Although the vast majority of missingness cases in Australia are short-term in nature, the overall costs incurred by the police are heavily skewed towards long-term missingness - indicating that additional support for both the police force and directly-impacted individuals may need to be greater allocated for such cases. Additionally, survey data revealed that only half of overall respondents employed additional specialists other than police during their search - indicating that perhaps there is a financial or information barrier preventing them from conveniently accessing such services.

Psychological Services

It has been identified that there is a need to increase the allocation of financial support to individuals and loved ones who require access to psychological services following the impact of a missing person's disappearance. Based on a majority indicating interest in receiving more psychological sessions than they were currently accessing, the government needs to examine how it can ease potential barriers to access such as the out-of-pocket cost for psychological services.

Whilst current schemes of financial support such as the Medicare Mental Health Care Plan alleviate the cost burden to an extent, increased funding is needed to further enable access to psychological services for individuals and loved ones affected by a missing person's disappearance. Furthermore, the initial psychological support offered directly after the missing person's disappearance needs to be more extensive as it can often be neglected by the public sector in its prioritisation of locating the missing person.

Healthcare

At the present moment, there is no financial support scheme in regard to accessing healthcare services that is catered specifically towards individuals affected by a missing person's disappearance. Given the impact that a missing person's disappearance can have on the creation or exacerbation of physical health issues, there needs to be increased recognition of the need for financial support that extends outside of the standard Medicare rebate offered on bulk-billed appointments. As a result, the government needs to increase funding towards a new financial scheme to ensure factors such as significant out of pocket costs do not limit affected individuals from accessing healthcare services.

Welfare

Assessing both the financial estimation of social payments and collected data from the survey reveal that these families involved are encountering a period of financial hardship. Taking into account frictional

unemployment and time taken off to spend time looking for their missing ones, the financial impact is significant given that all of the survey respondents mentioned that a member of their family was the one who went missing, which places stress on the entire family.

Increased funding to social payments would be a suitable solution to help alleviate the issue of families who are financially struggling with the disappearance of a family member. This can be achieved by including increased funding for those with larger families which can be identified during the application process for social payments. As a result, this should also help individuals who are also struggling emotionally as it relieves pressure during their time of being frictionally unemployed.

Legal Services

Although the majority of survey respondents did not choose to engage with legal services during the time at which their associated missing person, the government is still able to further contribute to providing legal aid to those who need it by establishing a number of partnerships with MPAN. By helping provide a form of connection with each state's Legal Aid Commission, this will provide increased exposure for Legal Aid to a wide range of people who may not know that they have access to this type of service. Consequently, this may relieve pressure on those who feel overwhelmed by the situation at hand.

Employment

The large financial burden faced by the private sector also demands an increase in internal awareness and support provided by organisations. Due to the prevalence of missingness in Australia, by including extra categories of leave such as compassionate and wellbeing leave, employees who may face this social issue may feel a greater amount of support. A greater level of support may drive a greater level of commitment & connectedness the employee feels towards the organisation. This may help organisations circumvent rehiring & retraining costs caused by resignations. Also, a greater level of education and awareness within employees on how to support a team member facing missingness of a family member or loved one will also help to further provide emotional and/or financial assistance to these individuals.

Other than the costs faced by the private sector, an increased investment into organisations such as MPAN or into the search efforts of employees will decrease the financial burden faced by those actively searching and promote societal awareness of this issue.

Citations

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