

Profiling Missing Persons within NSW



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Introduction

When a person is first reported missing to the police, there is no established way for the responding officer to determine if a missing person is the victim of foul play, if they have left to suicide, or if that person is likely to shortly return home. To date no research has been conducted in this area (Henderson et al., 2000; Maxson, Little, & Klein., 1988; Newiss, 1999). Because the research into missing persons is so minimal, there is a lack of understanding as to how to assess possible risk factors. Having some sense of the likely reasons for going missing could help the police to appropriately allocate resources. Persons who are missing due to foul play or suicide could be identified and responded to with greater urgency.

Aim

The present study is concerned only with runaway, suicide and foul play persons because these three categories occur more frequently than do other types of missing persons, such as those who are lost or who have been in an accident. Pre-disappearance behaviour is expected to be more easily differentiated across the three groups. For instance, those who have run away, as well as those who have suicided, are expected to have displayed, either explicitly or implicitly, behavioural evidence which supports their decision to run away or suicide.

In the present research profiling is a methodology used to identify, not who the missing person is, but rather what has happened to the missing person. The challenge in this study was to determine what type of pre-disappearance behaviours and circumstances could be identified without the presence of the missing person, as well as factors relating to the psychological state of the individual.

Analyses: Chi-square statistics were generated for all the data. This was followed by data mining. The Weka (Waikato Environment for Knowledge Analysis package) system is the choice of mining tool for the present research because it is a well documented platform that is reliable. This analysis uses the *j48.part* classification scheme which uses a similar algorithm to learning as *j48*, but produces only decision rules.

Method

Data: Solved missing persons cases from the NSW Police Force. A total of 357 missing persons files were selected for inclusion in this research. The sample ranged in age from 9 years to 77 years with a mean age of 28 years ($SD = 15$ years). There were 184 females (51.5%) in the entire sample, compared to 173 (48.5%) males. There were 250 (70%) runaways, 54 (15.1%) persons who attempted or completed suicide and 53 (14.8%) persons who had met with foul play.

All aspects of the information contained within the files were considered for their capacity to predict type of missing person. Determining what aspects of the data were suitable and obtainable required combing through the files a number of times. Content analysis of missing persons cases yielded 26 variables. The 26 variables are listed below.

Demographic Factors: age, gender and ethnic group by appearance.

Social background factors: marital status, whether there are any dependents, residential circumstances, current occupation and geographical location of residence.

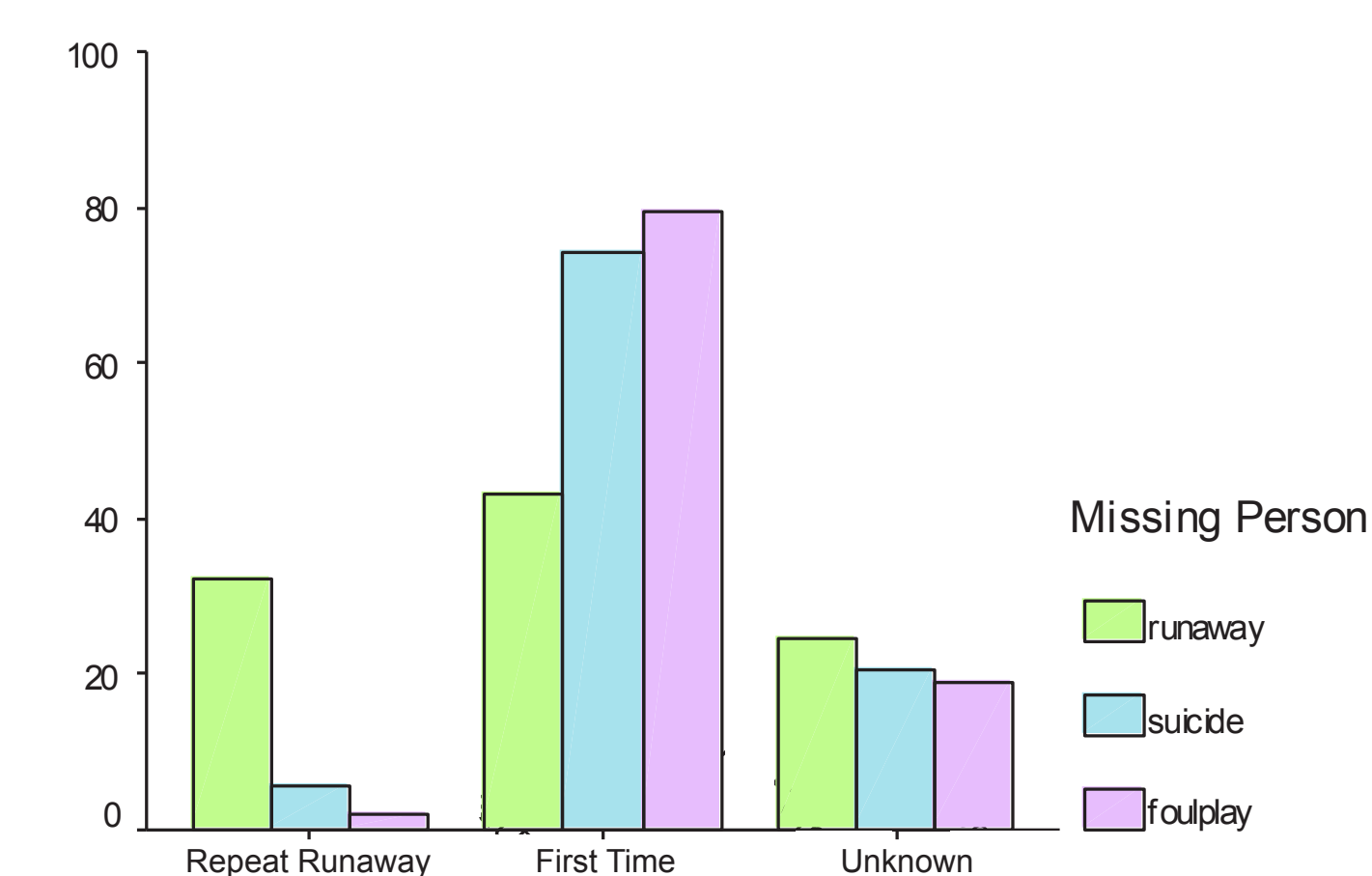
Circumstantial characteristics: included time of the day, day of the week, season, whether the person was last seen in public or private, and who the reporting person is.

Personality and behavioural factors: whether being missing is out of character for him or her, what the reporting person thinks or suspects has happened to the missing person, what risk factors for foul play are known to be present, whether the missing person was known to be rebellious or deviant in any way, and if the missing person has run away in the past.

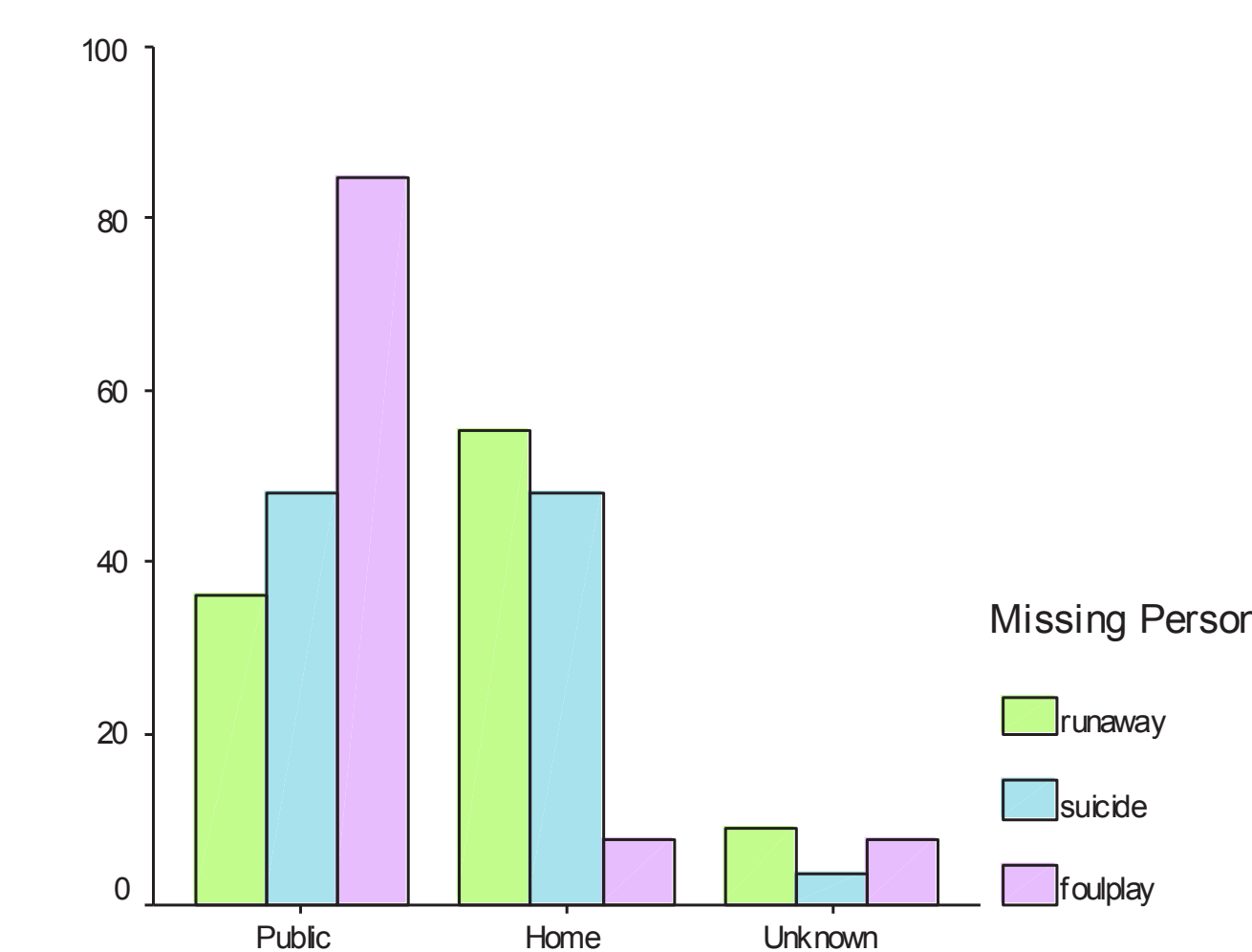
Mental health factors: whether there is a known history of suicide attempt or talk of suicide, the presence of any apparent mental health issues, drug or alcohol issues, and presence of long-term stressors and short-term stressors.

Event Details: the method used to complete suicide, whether the perpetrator was known or a stranger to the victim of foul play, and the persons life or death status when he or she was located.

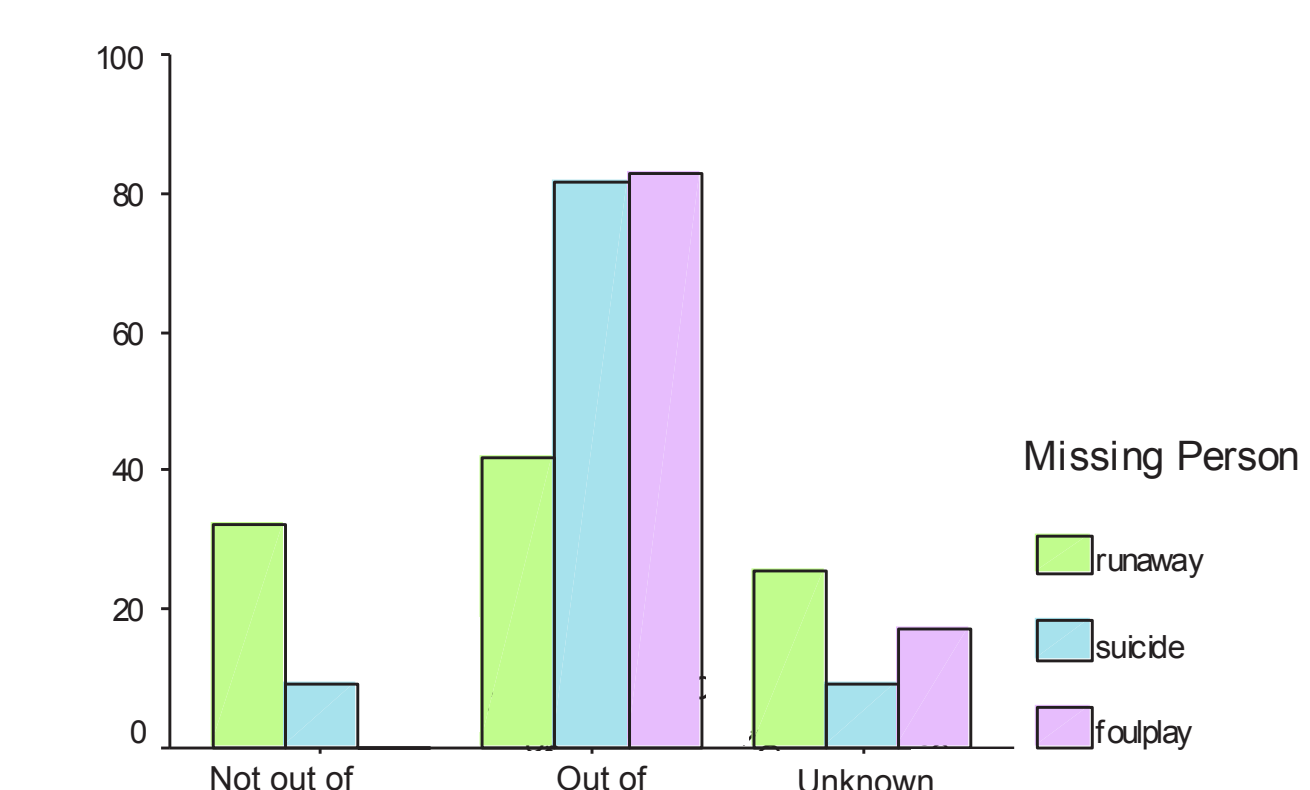
Results



Previous History of Running Away

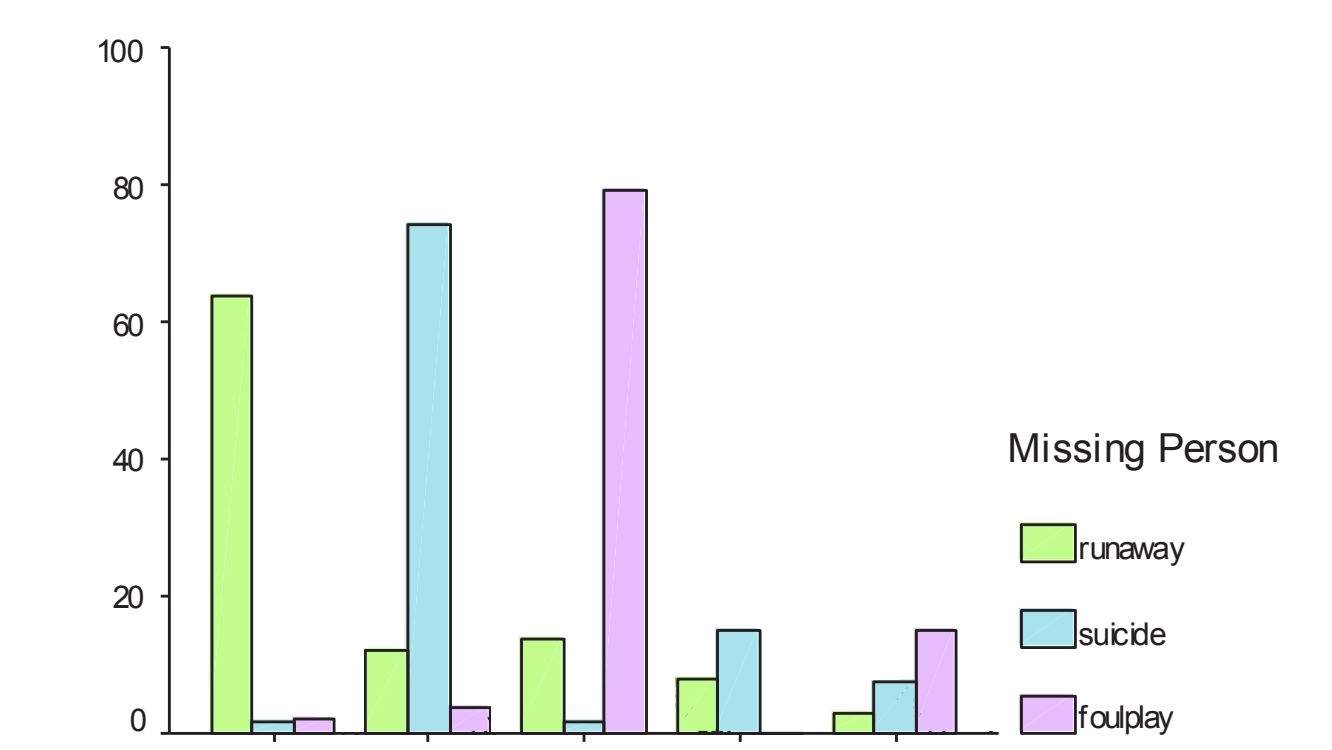


Whether Last Seen in Public or Home



Whether Disappearance is Out of Character

Suspicious of the Reporting Person proved to be the most significant variable within the research. This variable was the strongest predictor of a missing persons status. Clearly, those close to the missing person are able to make the best judgment because they know the person so well.



Suspicious of Reporting Person

Conclusion

The present research offers policing personnel specific areas within the person's lifestyle, behaviour, and psychological wellbeing that previously have not been fully realised both in regard to the relevance of certain characteristics as well as unique ways in which the groups differ. Additionally, the findings from this study support the argument that a peer can accurately judge the likely motives or goals of the person who is missing, and in so doing accurately advise the police of the possible risks that the missing person may be exposed to. Importantly, this information is unique to each type of missing person examined here.

Acknowledgements

Henderson, M., Henderson, P., & Kiernan, C. (2000). *Missing persons: Incidence, issues and impacts*. Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice (No 144), Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra.
Newiss, G. (1999). *Missing presumed ...?: The police response to missing persons*. Police Research Series (No. 114), Home Office, London.
Maxson, C. L., Little, M. A., & Klein, M. W. (1988). Police response to runaway and missing children: A conceptual framework for research and policy. *Crime and Delinquency*, 34, 84-102.