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.

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, as well as factors relating to the psychological state of the individual.

Analyses: Chi-square statistics were generated for all variables.

Results

Suspisions 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.

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

