



# **Missing Exploited Children During Covid-19 Lockdown**

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## **Statistics**

During lockdown there was a 35% reduction in the number of children reported missing to the police. When lockdown was lifted, the numbers started to increase but they never reached the previous pre-Covid levels. Just before the second lockdown late last year, the number of reports per week were still 12% less than the equivalent weeks the previous year. The average reduction over the whole period equates to approximately a 25% reduction.

Liverpool University conducted some analysis of the data from several forces to identify changes in the profile of missing children during this period. They ascertained that although there was an overall reduction in children reported missing, of those that were reported, a greater percentage:

- were categorised as low risk.
- were older.
- went missing for shorter periods.
- were reported missing from care homes.
- had suffered violence, racial, transphobic or domestic abuse or were suffering from mental health issues.
- were found 41-80 miles from where they went missing.

Some of these findings appear to contradict each other. If a greater percentage of children were suffering from abuse and mental health issues and were being found greater distances from home, how can that be reconciled with a greater number being categorised as low risk and being missing for shorter periods?

The finding that a greater percentage were categorised as low risk was also in contrast to missing adults where a greater percentage of missing adults were categorised as high risk due to depression, mental health issues, self-harm, suicidal thoughts, and abuse.

Discussion took place nationally with police missing person specialists to understand this analysis of the data. Local Authorities were reporting that most children in care were complying with the Covid-19 direction to stay at home. Consequently, there was a genuine reduction in the number of children in care who were going missing. However, some forces were reporting that some care homes were reporting children in care as missing as soon as they were leaving the premises in breach of the Covid-19 direction. Many of these children were just going out to meet their friends. Initially, many professional carers felt that they were not allowed to leave the residential care home to go looking for their children as they thought that they would themselves be breaching the direction to stay at home. Other care homes

struggled to release staff from the care home to go looking for their children because of reduced staffing levels due to sickness and self-isolation. There were also concerns that if a member of staff attended the home address of a friend of the child, that the member of staff may catch Covid-19 and bring it back into the care home. Consequently, as soon as a child left the care home they were being reported as missing and the police were being asked to locate them and bring them back. Parents were not habitually reporting their children missing in these circumstances but were going out to find their children and bring them home. There was also some anecdotal evidence from third sector organisations that some parents were reluctant to report their children missing even when there were concerns due to the fear of being fined. Consequently, the combination of these factors led to a greater percentage of children who were being reported missing to the police coming from care homes. As older children were more likely to breach the Covid-19 direction to stay at home, this also probably accounted for a greater percentage of the children being reported missing being older. As these children were not really missing but were just breaching the Covid-19 direction to stay at home to go and meet friends, a greater percentage of children being reported missing were categorised as low risk and were located quicker.

ACC Hankinson therefore wrote to all forces providing advice on the appropriate reporting of incidents, the use of the Philomena protocol and discouraging the use of fines in these cases.

If we remove these low risk cases (that more relate to breaches of the direction to stay at home) from the data, the remaining cases were of concern. A much higher percentage of the remaining cases involved abuse or mental health issues and the percentage of these that were high risk more reflected what we saw in adults. There is consensus within policing that there were far fewer genuine missing incidents during lockdown, but those children who did runaway from home were suffering higher levels of mental distress or were escaping abuse within the family home.

We also considered why there was a greater percentage of children who were travelling further. Although we wondered whether this may be linked to county lines, all the anecdotal evidence suggested that county lines has been seriously disrupted in the early days of the lockdown because it was easier for BTP to identify children on the rail network and the organised crime groups had to quickly adapt their tactics. Anecdotal evidence suggested that the organised crime groups started to use children more locally and for shorter periods of time. There was an alternative possible explanation. Some care homes reported that there was an increased number of children that were going missing to go and meet their parents and families because contact visits had been suspended. This was particularly a problem for children who had been placed out of their local authority area. The local authorities quickly

responded to this trend and started to arrange virtual contact sessions between these children and their families to try and reduce these incidents.

As time went on, we also received reports that organised crime groups had increased the use of private hire vehicles to transport children conveying drugs to other areas.

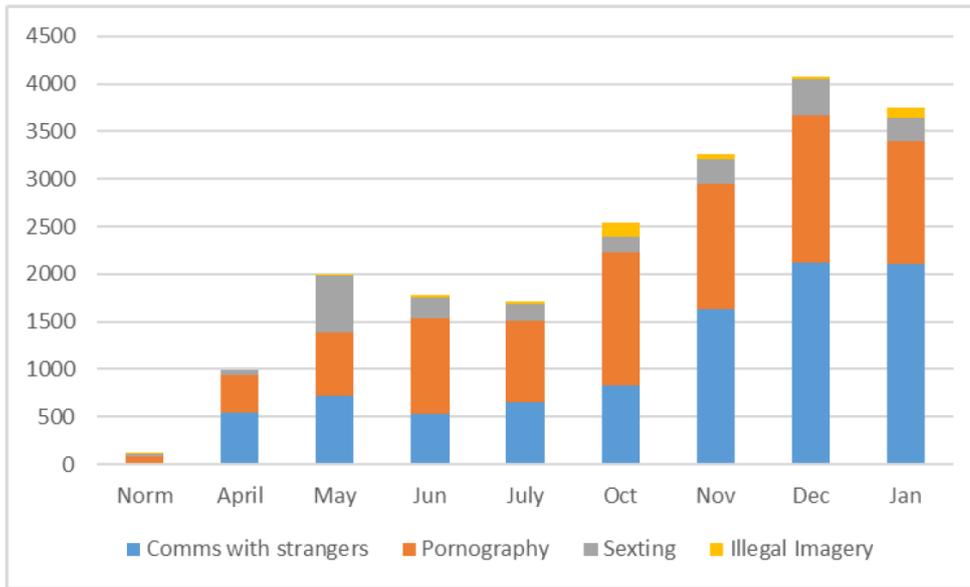
From the statistics, analysis and anecdotal evidence, there is a consensus within policing that the risk to children arising from missing behaviour reduced during lockdown. However, other risks were emerging. There were real concerns about children being groomed online. Children had greater access to laptops which had been supplied by schools to try and continue their education. However, many of these children were using these laptops to access pornographic sites and speak to strangers online. eSafeGlobal who monitor the online activity of children using laptops supplied by schools, colleges and local authorities reported:

- *25% more incidents reported to schools and Local authorities of young people communicating with strangers in April than in the whole of the 12-week autumn term 2020.*
- *3x more sexting and grooming reported in April than pre lockdown.*
- *10x more incidents of pornography being viewed by children than pre lockdown, with a higher number than usual of pornographic images being viewed offline via – external drives/ PhotoViewer.<sup>1</sup>*
- *Significant amount of incidents detected on social media/chat/video apps platforms.*
- *An increase in the amount of reportable incidents detected on gaming applications such as Roblox/ GTA/ Xbox chat.*
- *Large numbers of incidents reported on Omegle that have been passed over to the Police including grooming of minors as young as 10 years old.*
- *“From 1<sup>st</sup> Oct to 31<sup>st</sup> Dec 2020, across 1650 children in care, in just 3 of our local authority customers, eSafe reported 5454 incidents of which 3327 were young people communicating with strangers, often adult, with 2125 of these incidents occurring via webcam.”*

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<sup>1</sup> This is a correction to the original report which stated there was 5x more incidents of pornography being viewed. The latest figures indicate that the true figure is 10x more incidents.

**Table 3: Prevalence of serious behaviour escalated between April 2020 & 31<sup>st</sup> January 2021 across 545,296 pupils**



### ***Long Term Impact and Innovation***

There have been some positive developments during the Covid-19 period which are likely to continue long-term. Some forces introduced virtual prevention interviews where a young person was located quickly and with hindsight the carer did not have significant concerns. The use of GoodSAM enabled one force to send a link to the young person’s mobile phone which enabled a video call to take place between the young person and the officer. This is recommended as good practice where with hindsight neither the police nor carer has significant concerns about the missing incident as it can reduce unnecessary police contact which we are increasingly aware can be harmful to the child. However, face to face interviews are preferred where there are concerns the young person may have suffered harm or have been exploited whilst missing.

Some Local Authorities and Third Sector organisations also trialled virtual return home interviews. There were mixed reports about their effectiveness.

Most forces are confident that the work they have done with their local authorities over appropriate reporting, the levels of intervention model, and the Philomena protocol will have long lasting effects. It is anticipated that where there is no real, immediate risk, no trigger incidents, and no precursor behaviour that residential care staff will undertake reasonable actions to establish the whereabouts of the young person in future before they report them missing to the police. This will then enable the police to concentrate on those cases where children have runaway from home or are at risk of either self-harm or exploitation.

## ***Challenges when Lockdown is Lifted***

One of the biggest concerns in respect of missing behaviour is what happens in respect of all those children who have been developing inappropriate online relationships with adults when those children are free to go out again. There is concern that those who exploit children will take the opportunity to arrange face to face meetings with those that they have groomed online during lockdown.

There will also be challenges around County Lines as the range of tactics used by organised crime groups have increased and they will be able to mix the new tactics with some of the old tactics which may make it harder to detect.

Although the police are hopeful that the work done around appropriate reporting will lead to permanent reductions in missing person reports, there is concern that genuine missing incidents will increase as children resume some of their previous missing behaviour prior to Covid-19.

There are also concerns about the long-term impact of the restrictions on the mental health of young people which may lead to an increase in the number of high-risk missing children incidents.

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