




<b>Case 6   Issue 36 – Missing people</b>		
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## Two girls missing from a children's home

*Allegations of rape and sexual assault following girls reported missing from a children's home, raising issues about:*

- *Consideration of all risk factors*
- *Accurate recording of information on incident logs*
- *Definitions of 'absent' and 'missing'*
- *Training of officers to carry out risk assessments on missing person cases*

This case is relevant to the following areas:

<b>Call handling</b> 	<b>Public protection</b> 
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## Overview of incident

Around 3.30pm Ms A, a care home worker, called the police to report Miss B and Miss C were missing from a children's home.

Ms D, a control room operator, took the call. During the call, Ms A reported there were concerns for Miss B regarding child sexual exploitation (CSE), drug taking and self-harm, and concerns for Miss C regarding suicide, self-harm, mood swings, anxiety, suspected epilepsy, and suspected autism. Ms A also said Miss C was vulnerable, she would follow Miss B, and if Miss B encouraged her to do something then she would probably do it. This information was recorded on the incident log along with a comment which said '\*\*\*\*' alongside "she is high-risk." A senior figure within the force control room told the IOPC asterisks are used to denote information of significance.

Ms A stated during the call Miss B and Miss C were not to be out un-supervised in the community. Ms A later clarified this point, stating Miss B and Miss C were not allowed out un-supervised in the community at certain times as part of a withdrawal of their privileges and allowances. Ms A also reported both girls had gone missing previously and one of them had previously attempted suicide. This information was not recorded on the incident log. However, Ms A and a colleague, Ms E, clarified to the IOPC that Miss B and Miss C were only not allowed out unsupervised at certain times, and this was not intended to be an indication of their vulnerabilities.

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Ms A told Ms D it was possible the girls had headed to the fair nearby and this was where she had lost sight of them. She said she was unaware if they had any money and there was no indication they had planned to go missing. This was recorded on the incident log. Ms D made an entry on the incident log which stated the girls “had only been gone an hour – therefore no immediate risk/concerns raised except for historical behaviour. Possibly appropriate as absent rather than missing at this time.”

The care home staff tried to track the girls’ mobile phone numbers but were unable to do so.

Around 20 minutes after the initial call, Police Sergeant (PS) F, the duty sergeant, reviewed the incident log. PS F told the IOPC he had not had sufficient training and there was little opportunity for this. In his review, he noted the absence appeared planned. He also noted the risk was lessened due to the time of day, it was a bank holiday, and the girls were together. He noted the log was to be reviewed again at 8pm. The result of this was the case would no longer appear on the live system but would sit in the background until the review time. Ms D recorded it was possibly appropriate for the girls to be recorded as ‘absent’ rather than ‘missing’ at this time. Following this incident, the force implemented a new policy where the absent category was no longer to be used for children missing from children’s homes, and they are automatically declared missing.

PS F told the IOPC he believed Ms D had indicated a medium-risk on the incident log. He acknowledged this was incorrect when shown the log. The definition of ‘absent’ included there was no apparent risk of harm. Therefore, the reference to medium-risk is contradictory to the absent categorisation, as it indicates PS F must have believed there was an element of risk.

At the time of this incident, a new force missing persons’ policy had recently been implemented. The new policy stated all decisions must be based around risk and criteria for a person being defined as ‘absent’ rather than ‘missing’ was that there is ‘no apparent risk’.

Ms G, the control room improvement and development manager, commented she was unable to find any evidence the absence had been pre-planned.

Ms A and Ms E told the IOPC in their experience, missing from home calls were usually subject to a four hour review. After the call to police, staff at the children’s home continued to try and find the girls and provide updates to police.

PS F finished his shift at around 7pm and was replaced by PS H. There was no record of a formal handover. Both officers referred in interview with the IOPC to the practice of a verbal update on live cases, or a practice of accessing the system to see what was happening. PS H was new to this role. It was noted by a senior officer at the force he may not have received any training as this did not always take place at the start of deployment. However, PS H had been exposed to risk assessment in previous roles.

No further information was passed to the police until almost 8pm. Ms E called the police and reported a former resident of the children’s home had notified them the last time Miss B went missing she had taken MDMA with a man that the former resident also knew. Ms I was the control room operator who took this call. She recorded the children’s home had received a call from a former resident but incorrectly recorded Miss B was with a man and had taken MDMA. Ms I denoted “\*\*\*” next to this entry, indicating significance. PS H told the IOPC he believed he knew the location of the girls based on this information, despite the fact the incident log only mentioned Miss B being with the man.

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Ms E told Ms I of her increased concern for Miss B. Last time she had gone missing she had self-harmed, cut her arms, and tried to kill herself by putting tights around her neck. Ms E also said she might try to get to the train station to try to get to the city where her mother lived. This information was not recorded on the incident log. Ms I recorded an entry on the incident log stating there was “no further information”.

At around 8.20pm PS H reviewed the incident log. He requested a call back to the children’s home to query who the former resident was. He asked on the log whether Miss B’s location was known to the children’s home at that time. In relation to Miss C, PS H noted on the incident log that as she was 16 and “apart from autistic spectrum there is no other suggestion that she is at risk of harm”. Given it was around 8pm on a bank holiday he did not believe it was unreasonable for her to be out. He noted the next review should take place at 11pm unless any further information came to light. There was no suggestion that PS H considered the other risk factors reported by staff at the children’s home.

The call back to the children’s home was made at around 8.30pm. The identity of the former resident was clarified. It was noted the man the former resident mentioned was also a former resident, but his location was unknown. A further call back was arranged for 9pm. The children’s home staff continued to look for Miss B and Miss C.

At around 9.10pm, Ms A called the police back and advised of a possible address for the former male resident. Ms A asked if it was ok for children’s home staff to visit the address. Around 10 minutes later, PS H confirmed this would be ok. Around the same time, it was recorded on the incident log PS H had advised if the girls were not found by midnight, they would be treated as missing rather than absent.

Children’s home staff visited the address of the former male resident but there was no answer at the door. However, while returning from the address, children’s home staff saw Miss B and Miss C getting out of a car. Soon after, Ms A called the police to report Miss B had alleged she had been raped and Miss C sexually assaulted.

Subsequently, one of the girls withdrew the allegation of sexual assault and the other girl subsequently withdrew her allegation of rape.

### Type of investigation

IOPC independent investigation

### Action by this force

1. As a result of this case, the force changed its policy so all young people reported as missing from children’s homes are automatically recorded as missing rather than absent.

### Outcomes for officers and staff

#### Police Sergeant F

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2. PS F, the on-duty sergeant at the time of the initial call from the children's home, was found to have a case to answer for misconduct. This was for categorising Miss B and Miss C as 'absent', in contravention of national and force guidance and for failing to consider all of the risk factors reported by children's home staff. PS F attended a misconduct meeting. This resulted in management advice being given.

### **Police Sergeant H**

3. PS H, the on-duty sergeant who took over from PS F, was found to have a case to answer for misconduct. This was for categorising Miss B and Miss C as 'absent', in contravention of national and force guidance and for failing to consider all of the risk factors reported by children's home staff. PS H attended a misconduct meeting. This resulted in management advice being given.

### **Questions to consider**

#### **Questions for policy makers and managers**

1. How does your force prepare officers to properly risk assess missing persons' cases?
2. Does your force understand when it is appropriate to expect carers to accept normal parenting responsibilities and undertake reasonable actions to try and establish the whereabouts of a young person in their care, and when it is appropriate for the police to intervene immediately and accept joint responsibility for finding that young person?
3. How does your force make sure information provided to call handlers is accurately recorded on the incident log?
4. How does your force make sure officers and staff involved in missing persons' cases are fully aware of the definitions of 'absent' and 'missing' categories?
5. What steps has your force taken to make sure staff at children's homes understand how the police will respond to reports of missing young people, and the action they need to take when a young person is reported missing?

#### **Questions for police officers and police staff**

6. How would the risk factors identified in this case have affected your decision making? Is there anything you would have done differently?