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An exploration into why there is an overrepresentation of BAME people in missing person cases

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Abstract

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Keywords

BAME, overrepresentation, missing person investigation, qualitative

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Abstract

The overrepresentation of Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) people in missing person cases is an issue that is not understood within society and has largely been neglected within academic literature to date. This study, therefore, aims to explore why this overrepresentation might exist by obtaining the views and opinions of 24 professionals (including police officers) working within the field of missing people. The study used a qualitative, exploratory method and an anonymous online survey containing a series of open-ended questions. Thematic analysis was performed on the data, and three main themes were identified; the first related to the idea that cultural issues within BAME communities increase the propensity for BAME people to go missing; the second related to how certain vulnerabilities, such as being an asylum seeker, are more likely to affect BAME people and therefore increase their propensity to go missing; the third alluded to how BAME overrepresentation may depend on geographical location. These themes, and associated sub-themes, provide insights regarding how best to address the overrepresentation of BAME people in missing person cases. For example, the need to develop preventative measures and educational programmes that target BAME communities, and the need for better representation of BAME people in relevant support services. Overall, the findings make a significant contribution to understanding the overrepresentation of BAME people in missing person cases and have important implications for organisations that work with missing people and BAME communities.

Keywords: BAME, overrepresentation, missing person investigation, qualitative.

Introduction

National statistics reveal that Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME¹) people are overrepresented in missing person cases in the UK (NCA, 2022). For example, while 14% of missing people in the UK are categorised as Black, census data indicate that Black people only make up 3% of the population (UK Government, 2020). There is currently a lack of general or academic understanding about why this overrepresentation of BAME people amongst the missing population exists. This study therefore aims to explore why this overrepresentation exists by obtaining the views and opinions of professionals working within the field of missing people. In addition, a literature review was performed to examine whether some ethnic minorities are more susceptible to factors most frequently associated with going missing in the UK adult population (mental health problems, relationship problems, and drug and alcohol problems; NCA, 2022). Each of these factors are reviewed below to provide contextual information surrounding the mechanisms of missingness and highlight their potential relevance for the BAME community.

Mental Health Problems

While there is currently no literature that specifically discusses ethnicity in the context of mental health problems and going missing, there is research relating to the links between (a) going missing and mental health, and (b) ethnicity and mental health. Regarding the former, Hirschel and Lab (1988) analysed missing person police reports from a large city in the US and found that 19% of the missing adults had a mental health problem. Subsequently, a growing body of research using empirical methods of analysis and real-world data has documented this link. For example, Gibb and Woolnough (2007) conducted an in-depth

¹ The authors are aware of the contentions around the acronym 'BAME' and understand that it is not fully inclusive of all ethnicities. However, this acronym was used during the completion of the research, hence this article, because of its common use and to remain congruent with the literature.

analysis of missing reports from across police forces in the UK and found that 80% of missing adults had mental health problems, 63% of which were clinically diagnosed. These findings are important because research suggests that BAME people are more likely to experience problems with mental health. For example, Bignall et al. (2019) examined racial disparities in mental health in an extensive review commissioned by NHS England. The review concluded that BAME people are at higher risk of mental health problems; are disproportionately affected by social detriments associated with mental health problems; are less likely to access mental health care; and are more likely to experience disparities in diagnosis, assessment and treatment of mental illness compared to White people. Further, once assessed, BAME people are more likely to be medicated for mental health problems as opposed to being referred for psychological therapy. Alarming, it was found that Black people were 40% more likely to access treatment via the criminal justice system as opposed to being dealt with at a primary care level (e.g., a GP) because the support for mental health problems was not given until it reached a crisis point. Disparities in risk, access, and treatment can have a detrimental impact on recovery as evidenced by mental illness being more likely to persevere and deteriorate for BAME people. Given that mental health problems have been identified as a leading cause of people going missing, it could be argued that mental health problems are a contributing factor to the overrepresentation of BAME people in the missing population.

Research by Jongsma et al. (2021) also highlighted the high likelihood of poor mental health amongst BAME people. They recruited 1,130 BAME participants and 1,497 population-based controls, and measured psychotic disorder alongside measures of social disadvantage, and experience of exclusion or discrimination. They found that participants from BAME backgrounds had much higher odds of having a psychotic disorder than White participants. This was found to be linked with social disadvantage, linguistic distance, and

sociocultural exclusion, which are also more prevalent amongst BAME people. These findings provide strong support for the suggestion that BAME people have an increased risk of developing mental health problems such as psychosis due to comorbid socioeconomic factors. However, it is apparent that there is currently a gap in the literature because research to date has not directly explored the link between mental health problems and the overrepresentation of BAME people in the missing population.

The idea that people from BAME backgrounds do not receive adequate support for mental health problems was explored by Loewenthal et al. (2012). They conducted focus groups with Bengali, Urdu, Tamil, and Somali speaking communities and found that barriers to accessing support were multi-faceted. First, many participants did not know how to access mental health support, or experienced issues such as language barriers and being fearful of mental health professionals. Most people also conveyed that there is a lack of understanding of common Western mental health problems such as depression and anxiety, or different conceptualisations of them within these communities. This qualitative study provided important insight into cultural barriers that can prohibit BAME communities from accessing support.

Relationship Problems

No research was found that specifically discusses ethnicity in the context of relationship problems and going missing. However, in a more general study, Henderson et al. (2000) examined the association between relationship problems and going missing via the analysis of 505 police recorded missing person reports, 270 in-depth interviews with family and friends of missing people, and consultation with 90 organisations who work with missing people. This multifaceted procedure enabled a holistic exploration of the topic. Based on their findings, the researchers proposed three typologies of causal factors for going missing; ‘dysfunctional’ (i.e., individuals who go missing due to mental health problems), ‘escape’

(i.e., those who leave to escape adverse or abusive family or home life situations), and ‘unintentional’ (i.e., those who are lost or exploited). Thus, adverse relationships within the home can cause someone to go missing by means of escaping. In addition, Stevenson et al. (2013) interviewed located missing adults and confirmed that abusive and strained family relationships are strong contributors to an adult going missing.

Drug and Alcohol Problems

Once again, no studies were found that examined all three factors of interest, in this case research that specifically examines ethnicity in the context of drug and alcohol problems and going missing. However, a large-scale piece of research by Huey and Ferguson (2020) explored the link between substance use and going missing. The researchers used thematic analysis to examine approximately 11,000 closed missing person reports between 2014 and 2018 and found that most missing adults engaged in maladaptive behaviours such as drug and alcohol use before going missing, demonstrating that substance abuse can be an important preceding factor.

Biased Media Coverage

Despite not being one of the top three recorded causes for an adult going missing (NCA, 2021), biased media coverage of missing person cases, and asylum seekers, have often featured in the literature exploring BAME people and going missing. The potential for biased media coverage of missing person cases according to ethnicity is particularly concerning because it can directly influence the likelihood of a missing person being found. Jeanis and Powers (2017) investigated the relationship between three demographic characteristics (age, gender and ethnicity) of missing persons and the likelihood of them receiving media attention that could aid their being found. They analysed a combination of 782 newspaper articles and broadcast news transcripts over several years, making it one of the most comprehensive, empirical studies on this topic. Importantly, they found that White missing people received

nearly three times as much media coverage than BAME missing people, that they were three times more likely to have news coverage at a national level, and that their coverage was more detailed. These findings suggest a media bias towards White missing person cases, which could be a contributing factor for why BAME missing people are often missing for a longer period of time (Jeanis & Powers, 2017).

Summary

As evidenced in this brief review of relevant literature, research suggests that there are key factors that can increase one's propensity to go missing and may be more prevalent amongst BAME people. However, it is also apparent that research to date has not considered whether mental health, relationship and/or drug and alcohol problems are more prevalent amongst people from BAME backgrounds, or whether BAME people are overrepresented in missing person cases for these reasons. Therefore, there is a clear gap in the literature and further research is needed to help understand why BAME people are overrepresented in missing person cases. The present study seeks to address this gap in the literature by obtaining the views and opinions of professionals (including police officers) working within the field of missing people in the UK to better understand why this overrepresentation might exist.

Method

Design

A qualitative, exploratory method utilising inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun et al., 2019), was used to explore views and opinions of professionals working within the field of missing people regarding why there might be an overrepresentation of BAME people in the missing population. Thematic analysis is considered theoretically flexible, allowing for a rich and in-depth analysis of the data to explore individuals' views and perceptions on a given topic.

Participants

Participants were recruited via a purposive sampling method. This sampling method is widely used within qualitative research and involves identifying and selecting participants that are particularly knowledgeable through their experiences about the area of research. As such, participants were selected based on their experience of working directly with missing persons in the UK. Seventy-one professionals (including police officers) started the study and 24 completed it, representing a 34% completion rate. The final sample of 24 participants was deemed appropriate for the purpose of qualitative analysis (Fugard & Potts, 2015), and provided sufficient data to reach saturation (i.e., where no new themes emerged from the data provided). Regarding demographic characteristics, 62% of participants identified themselves as male and 38% female, and 83% classified themselves as White British, 12% as BAME, and 5% chose not to specify.

Procedure

Data were collected via the use of an anonymous online survey created using Qualtrics². The survey contained five key open-ended questions and was disseminated to professionals who worked in the area of missing persons, including police officers from missing person units. The survey began by explaining the purpose of the study. Participants who consented to take part were then asked for some basic demographic information (e.g., gender, ethnicity). Five key open-ended questions followed, and participants were asked to give their honest and expert opinions. No time restrictions or word limits were imposed.

1. In your opinion, why are BAME individuals overrepresented amongst missing persons? (Please talk about adults and children separately)

² Qualtrics is an online software programme that allows users to disseminate questionnaires/surveys for the purpose of data collection.

2. In your opinion, are there any factors relating to the individual and/or the situation that differ for missing persons dependent upon their race or ethnicity?
3. In your opinion are there any factors relating to the investigation (risk assessment, allocation of resources, etc) that contribute towards BAME individuals being overrepresented amongst missing persons?
4. What do you think could be done to address the issue of BAME individuals being overrepresented amongst missing persons?
5. Is there anything else you'd like to tell us about this issue that we haven't asked about above? Feel free to give any thoughts or information that you see as relevant.

Analysis

The survey data were analysed using inductive thematic analysis, following the six-stage approach of Braun and Clarke (2006). An inductive approach meant that the themes were linked to the data, rather than being assigned to pre-existing coding frameworks or the researchers' analytic preconceptions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Consequently, the themes were heavily data driven, which allowed organic and novel findings to be discovered (Patton, 2015). Emerging themes were identified at a semantic level to establish the explicit meaning of the data and reduce researcher bias (Willig, 2013).

The first stage involved the lead author familiarising themselves with the data by reading through the completed questionnaires and making notes of potential areas of interest for the purpose of analysis. The data were read several times during this process. The second stage involved the lead author generating initial codes via the systematic coding of features relevant to the research topic, and paraphrasing ideas emerging from data so that the same ideas mentioned using different words fit in the same category. During the third stage, the lead author collated the codes into themes, while the fourth stage involved reviewing themes and checking if they were appropriate to the research topic. During the fifth stage, the first

author refined the specifics of each theme and sub-theme, and names and definitions were produced for each. The sixth and final stage involved the selection of examples of extracts to reflect the identified themes and sub-themes. Importantly, all data and analysis were made available to the co-authors. Furthermore, the identified themes and sub-themes were reviewed and discussed to ensure agreement.

Results and Discussion

Three overarching themes were identified during the thematic analysis: (1) cultural issues, with the subthemes of lack of support and addressing differences; (2) vulnerability, with the subthemes of being undocumented and preventative measures; and (3) geographical location. Each theme, and the associated subthemes, is described in relation to the research aim and discussed with reference to the limited available literature.

Cultural Issues

The first key theme, present across nearly all participants, was that BAME people are overrepresented in missing person cases due to specific issues within BAME communities that increase their propensity to go missing. The first subtheme outlines these key issues, and the second subtheme presents suggestions for how to address these issues.

Lack of Support

Participants frequently alluded to issues within BAME communities that increase their propensity to go missing, including a lack of support and stigma associated with mental health problems within these communities. For example:

No formal family or friend-group structure that offers support for mental health issues or other issues within BAME communities, as well as

unfamiliarity with the area and what services are available. This makes the person more prone to harm and/or exploitation. (Participant 09)

Young BAME people are over-represented in missing cases especially. Often, these younger people will conceal from older, more conservative family members the ways in which they've adapted to secular British society, and that concealment leaves them open to be exploited by criminal gangs or it permits other issues (such as mental health problems) to spiral out of control. (Participant 10)

Limited research has shown that BAME people often suffer with more severe mental health problems for varying reasons (e.g., discrimination or social disadvantage, Vargas et al., 2020). However, no research has explored whether mental health problems and a lack of support contribute to the overrepresentation of BAME people in missing person cases. The above extracts suggest that BAME people who experience mental health problems are more likely to go missing because they feel unsupported, isolated, and vulnerable. This interpretation is consistent with general National Crime Agency statistics that present mental health problems as the top reason for an adult to go missing in the UK (NCA, 2021).

Participants also suggested that stigma is more likely to be associated with mental health problems within BAME communities, causing family relationships to become strained. Stevenson et al. (2013) touched upon how strained relationships are a key contributing factor to someone of any ethnicity going missing. Furthermore, National Crime Agency statistics present relationship problems as the second largest cause for someone going missing (NCA, 2021). Therefore, strained relationships may be particularly prevalent in BAME communities and contribute to the overrepresentation of BAME people in missing person cases.

A related contributing factor often mentioned by participants related to BAME people being less likely to trust support services and the police, reducing the likelihood of their accessing external support services. The following extracts illustrate this finding:

Yes, there will be cultural issues and considerations. Mistrust of the police.

(Participant 20)

Cultural differences in understanding of issues such as mental health. Also distrust of police and services. (Participant 07)

These extracts highlight the belief that people within BAME communities may be resistant to seeking help from support services and authorities outside of their community because of a lack of trust in these services. This lack of trust could be related to the perception within BAME communities that their values misalign with the rest of society, leading to feelings of alienation (Bignall et al., 2019). Consequently, the problems people experience within these communities may remain unresolved and contribute their decisions to go missing. This interpretation is consistent with that of Bignall et al. (2019), who found that BAME people are less likely to access mental health support due to identified disparities in the assessment and treatment of BAME people. Similarly, Loewenthal et al. (2012) suggested that BAME people are fearful of accessing support and face barriers in doing so. However, these studies did not consider the link between this reluctance of BAME people to seek support and their increased likelihood of going missing as being a result of unresolved issues. Therefore, these findings offer insights into how this reluctance to access support may increase the likelihood of going missing.

Addressing the Differences

Participants commented on how the causes of BAME overrepresentation identified above could be dealt with using preventative, societal measures. For example:

Helping community leaders to more fully meet the needs of their community, through training around mental health issues, better funding, awareness of the ways that internet content might affect younger people and so on. (Participant 08)

Raise awareness within BAME communities as to the core reasons why people go missing. Provide supportive networks, information in different languages, use places of worship as a conduit for communication. (Participant 01)

It is important, therefore, to address the distrust of services and stigmas towards mental health problems in BAME communities to reduce BAME overrepresentation in missing person cases. Participants suggested that it would be good to ensure a greater representation of BAME people working within support services and the police to encourage BAME people to use these services. They suggested that education regarding mental health problems, and how best to provide support for people with these problems, should be offered to people in BAME communities. Ultimately, these measures would aim to prevent problems from persisting to a crisis point where they contribute to the decision to go missing. Participants also commented on the need for targeted preventative approaches, as illustrated by the following extracts:

More targeted support services. Better communications around therapy and support available for BAME individuals. (Participant 05)

I certainly think that the ‘one size fits all’ approach of services in this country is unhelpful. For example, the worst nightmare of most BAME people would be to have a godless White woman from social services sit in their living room and say something like “We need to talk about alternative, equally valid, sexual preferences. (Participant 18)

It is apparent that participants did not consider a ‘one size fits all’ approach is appropriate. Instead, they argued that support services need to be culturally sensitive and directly address common language and communication barriers if they are to help reduce the number of BAME missing person cases. These suggestions are consistent with research by Lowenthal et al. (2012), which highlighted that BAME people are often discouraged from accessing support when presented with language barriers.

Vulnerability

The second theme to be commented upon frequently, related to the idea that there are a range of adverse circumstances (e.g., being an asylum seeker), that can make BAME people particularly vulnerable to going missing. Key adverse circumstances are outlined in the first subtheme, and suggestions for how to tackle these circumstances are presented in the second subtheme.

Being Undocumented

When asked why BAME people are overrepresented in missing person cases, participants commented that a large proportion of missing person cases relate to asylum seekers and undocumented migrants, most of which come from BAME backgrounds.

Furthermore, they suggested that adverse circumstances (e.g., exploitation) are prevalent amongst these groups, which make going missing more likely. For example:

A high percentage of missing persons are asylum seekers and undocumented migrants who are trafficked into this country and then go missing shortly after coming to the attention of the authorities. Inevitably, BAME is overrepresented as a high proportion of asylum seekers and undocumented migrants are non-White. (Participant 06)

We get a few [BAME] missing people who may have been trafficked into the country and were arrested following a cannabis farm seizure and they are then placed into a safe house. Often, such people will be reported missing as they move around the country and don't stay in the same place, probably because they're being exploited. (Participant 04)

An increase in migrant populations may lend itself to an increase of BAME missing people, as many migrants go missing once in the UK. (Participant 02)

These extracts relate to the belief that the overrepresentation of BAME people in missing person cases, at least in part, reflects the fact that asylum seekers and undocumented migrants are more likely to be from BAME backgrounds (UNHCR, 2020). It was frequently suggested that people from this group have an increased likelihood of going missing, and of being exploited or trafficked by organised crime groups. These findings expand on the limited literature relating to the association between being an adult asylum seeker or undocumented migrant and going missing, which suggests that these people may go missing

because they get exploited or deliberately want to stay ‘under the radar’ while seeking out undocumented work (Brunovskis & Surtees, 2007; Shalev-Greene & Alys, 2016). Thus, people who are missing from official documents are more likely to remain missing for a long period of time because these missing people are harder to locate. It is important, therefore, that agencies working with BAME missing persons are aware of the risk of exploitation and deliberate missingness as potential contributing factors to their going missing.

Preventative Measures

Participants suggested that certain actions could be taken to address the apparent risk of asylum seekers or undocumented migrants going missing. Actions included gathering more information on these people when they come into the country, having preventative measures in place to decrease the likelihood of exploitation, and having support for them at a national level when they enter the country. The following extracts illustrate this finding:

More early intervention with individuals to prevent them from being exploited, and a better understanding of who these people are in case this does happen. (Participant 12)

Tackle social deprivation and poverty, educate asylum seeking communities on red flags to look out for being exploited. Also make society a fairer place.
Tackle human trafficking and modern-day slavery. Improve mental health service for immigrants. (Participant 06)

These extracts provide important insights into possible ways to prevent BAME people from being missing for long periods of time. For example, obtaining identifying documents from undocumented migrants would prevent them being so difficult to locate, and therefore

less likely to remain missing. Participants also commented on the need for support on a national level to help tackle human trafficking and exploitation. For example, the provision of education for asylum seekers or undocumented migrants regarding how best to reduce the risk of exploitation.

Geographical Location

The third and final theme to be mentioned frequently, related to the geographical location of BAME overrepresentation rather than the causes of BAME people going missing. For example:

The ethnic makeup of the county (Leicestershire) leads to a high level of BAME in the city and surrounding areas, and thus could explain this overrepresentation. (Participant 03)

I am not aware that this overrepresentation is the case in Scotland, BAME missing cases will usually represent populations, as with other issues. (Participant 11)

These participants argued that BAME overrepresentation in missing person cases is dependent on locations in the UK associated with large BAME communities. Interestingly, participants who used location to explain how BAME people are not overrepresented in missing person cases tended to work in the South of England where BAME populations are generally smaller (except for participants working in Kent due to its links with asylum seekers and migrants, UK Government, 2020). In contrast, participants who used location to explain how BAME people are overrepresented in missing person cases tended to work in the Midlands and the North

of England (e.g., Leicestershire and Yorkshire). They explained this overrepresentation is caused by the increased presence of BAME people in general in these geographical locations (UK Government, 2020). Finally, some participants explicitly commented on the equity of investigatory processes, as illustrated by the following extracts:

They are not overrepresented. The same investigation process and risk grading is followed for any missing person. It is more to do with BAME populations in certain locations. (Participant 14)

When reported missing, all individuals are given the same level of attention to locate them. (Participant 04)

These extracts reflect the belief that BAME overrepresentation is caused by police bias or discrimination, and that all missing person cases are assessed and treated in the same way regardless of ethnicity. However, this belief is inconsistent with the lack of trust BAME people have in the police and research that demonstrates police biases certainly exist in other areas. For example, Howerton (2006) found that there are biases in response times to crimes dependent on ethnicity, whereby response times were longer for BAME victims. Further research is needed to investigate whether biases in the Criminal Justice System affect BAME overrepresentation in missing person cases.

Implications

The findings in this study help address the gap in general understanding and academia about why BAME adults are overrepresented in missing person cases, and what could be done to address this issue. Furthermore, they have real-world implications for the Missing

Person Unit of the National Crime Agency and the UK charity Missing People, as well as other organisations and institutions working with missing people or BAME communities. For example, it is important to make these organisations aware of the issues that could increase a BAME person's propensity to go missing, including the apparent lack of support for mental health problems due to stigma within BAME communities, and being an asylum seeker or undocumented migrant. These findings can also be used to inform the development of preventative measures, such as education around mental health problems in BAME communities that could help prevent these issues from reaching a crisis point that causes someone to go missing. The finding that a better representation of BAME people working in support services and positions within the police could help alleviate the lack of trust that BAME people have in these institutions also has implications for those responsible for policy and recruitment in these areas.

The findings regarding the vulnerability of BAME people have additional implications for the services and organisations that work with asylum seekers or undocumented migrants, such as the UN Refugee Agency. They highlight that these statuses make going missing more likely due to the comorbidity of exploitation. Therefore, it is important that these organisations use this knowledge to ensure preventative measures around these adverse consequences are securely in place. Furthermore, these organisations could develop educational materials for vulnerable people regarding the key warning signs of being exploited. Finally, the finding that a lack of documentation is highly related to going missing, is informative for these organisations, so that they can prioritise obtaining sufficient identifying documentation.

Limitations and Future Research

There are some general limitations of this study that must be considered. First, the research did not use BAME participants who have experience of going missing themselves,

and instead relied on the views and opinions of professionals who work with them. However, given that the method used in this study is simple and transferable, future research could easily extend this research to explore this topic from the perspective of people who have direct experience of going missing. It would also be interesting to compare the insights from professionals and missing people to examine the extent to which they are in agreement.

Second, it is important to acknowledge that the study was exploratory in nature. While the findings are informative, it is interesting to note that some of the topics identified in the introduction as having links with BAME people going missing, were not commented upon by participants in this study. For example, relationship problems, and drug and alcohol problems were not presented as reasons for BAME overrepresentation. Future research is needed to focus more specifically on whether the key reasons for going missing reported by the National Crime Agency (NCA, 2021) equally apply to both White and BAME missing individuals.

Conclusion

In summary, the present study unearthed some interesting and potentially impactful perspectives into possible reasons for the overrepresentation of BAME people in missing person cases. The findings provide a unique insight from professionals working in this area, with overarching themes suggesting that the main reasons for this overrepresentation relate to cultural issues that increase vulnerability, and being an asylum seeker or undocumented migrant, which is associated with many vulnerabilities. The study also provided tentative insights for organisations that work with missing people and BAME communities into how this overrepresentation could be addressed, such as including preventative measures to reduce the likelihood of these vulnerabilities causing someone to go missing. By examining expert opinions regarding why the overrepresentation is thought to exist, this article has contributed towards better understanding, and therefore mitigating, the issue.

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