MOLE HILLS FROM MOUNTAINS

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Lancashire has a serious problem with the volume of misper cases, which has been consistently high for years. Around 9,000 cases are investigated annually with a total police cost of £5.4m. Many missing persons suffer social harm or exclusion as a result of missing behaviour.

A paper based system of case management provided no useful data to identify solutions. There was no strategic framework to facilitate problem solving. No multi-agency work was being conducted.

We conducted an extensive literature review. National research suggested 20% reductions were possible for those in care. We developed a computerised system to provide meaningful data for analysis. 41% of all reports concerned repeat individuals, with 81% of these from children's homes/hospitals. A few individuals were found to be prolific repeat cases. One was reported missing 90 times in 19 months.

We recognised the ability of other agencies to address the problem, and engaged them as partners. Problem profiling identified the prevalence of mispers in criminality, drug abuse and prostitution, further increasing the policing burden and impact on the community.

We developed protocols with Lancashire County Council, private care companies and hospitals, based on information sharing, graded response, shared ownership, debriefing and interventions. We appointed police liaison officers to each establishment and established multi-agency tasking and coordinating, informed by quarterly analysis.

Southern Division implemented our solutions, using the rest of the force as a control sample. Comparing three quarter year periods, the numbers of repeat misper cases in southern division decreased as follows:

July to September 2002 with July to September 2003:   19% reduction.
October to December 2002 with October to December 2003:   68% reduction.
January to March 2003 with January to March 2004 :   68% reduction.

Projected annual savings are £209k for southern division and £1.8m for the force.

By tackling our targets of individuals in care, children's homes and mental health wards, we were able to achieve significant results and reduce the police burden, releasing resources to tackle crime and disorder. Whilst it is difficult to quantify, we can demonstrate that reductions in repeat missing incidents, means that an individual's potential involvement in crime, drug misuse or prostitution will have been prevented. This benefits the individual, the local community and reduces the consequential burden on police resources.

Objectives

Lancashire Constabulary has to commit a massive amount of resources to dealing with the 9000 missing person (misper) reports it receives each year. 41% of these are repeat mispers.

Anecdotally, operational officers often complained of feeling overwhelmed by the demands made on their time by missing from home cases and of being thwarted by such demands in their attempts to address crime and disorder in their communities.

Moreover, officers knew that many of the missing from home reports they were investigating related to young runaways from care homes and to mental health patients from local psychiatric units. These individuals were known, while missing, to further add to the policing resource burden by exposure to or involvement in crime (as victim or offender), substance abuse, disorder, anti social behaviour, prostitution or sexual exploitation. Multiple repeat missing from home episodes involving the same individuals and/or the same care establishment were common but had not been analysed. In short, the problem appeared ripe for a POP approach.

Repeat missing episodes, with the exposure it brings to risky and adverse activities, is also felt to be a significant factor in the marginalisation and social exclusion of these already vulnerable individuals.

This was endorsed by local authority children's homes, private children's homes and psychiatric units, who were all consulted about the nature and scale of the problem. This consultation reaffirmed much of our own scanning process but also highlighted that we were likely to meet with some cultural resistance and fatalistic attitudes in our attempts to address the problem.

In summary, the problem is threefold: the community is deprived of massive amounts of policing while officers search for mispers: the mispers themselves are often vulnerable and engaged in activities which have an adverse effect on community life and result in yet further resource burdens for the police and; the already vulnerable individuals involved, by virtue of these activities, become more marginalized and excluded making them more likely to continue as a burden to society rather than realising their full potential.

The vast majority of police forces operate a paper-based system for recording and investigating missing from home reports. Lancashire used a paper-based system until July 2002. However, it was simply not possible to conduct detailed and meaningful analysis of the missing from home problem when the records amounted to weighty piles of often illegible case papers stored at multiple and disparate locations around the force area.

The objective for 'Mole Hills From Mountains' was to reduce the incidence of missing persons with an emphasis on those who repeatedly go missing and with a particular emphasis on young people in care and mental health patients.

Nationally, other police forces face similar resource implications. Dealing with such cases involves much more than the police simply receiving, recording and circulating relevant information. As each case has the potential for a tragic outcome and the accompanying ever-closer scrutiny of our response, the majority of reports result in detailed and expensive investigations.

Definition

We needed to test the information we believed to be true from the scanning process.

We conducted an extensive literature review of academic, police and other agency sources on the subject. We also set up a working party to identify good practice elsewhere in police forces and in other agencies.

We developed a computerised missing from home system for the recording and management of missing from home cases by the Lancashire Constabulary. A User Group was set up consisting of representatives from each territorial division and relevant operational and support departments. This was to ensure that through extensive consultation, the most operationally user friendly system was created, that also provided relevant management information to assist with tasking and co-ordinating processes. This involved many hours of design and development but was carried out in our own time and in a limited amount of downtime squeezed from our standard working day. We then piloted and improved the system, constantly re-applying the SARA model, before rolling it out to the whole force together with a training package. This provided an opportunity to conduct detailed analysis of the problem, which was simply not possible with the old paper based system. However, we had to wait several months for the system to acquire a bank of data before commencing the analysis.

We also analysed existing incident logging data which was limited but, nevertheless, a valuable source of information with which to corroborate or challenge our emerging findings.

We commissioned two experienced and qualified analysts at divisional and force levels to conduct two independent 'problem profiles' as part of our analysis. The headline finding, which confirmed and quantified an issue highlighted in the scanning process was that 41% of all Lancashire Missing Persons reported to the police were 'repeat mispers' and that 81% of these emanated from children's care homes and psychiatric units. It appeared that these were the areas of the wider 'missing from home' problem most likely to yield to a POP approach. The analysis also highlighted several individual young people from care homes who were prolific repeat mispers. One was reported missing 90 times in 19 months and another 78 times in 12 months. As a result we highlighted those individuals who had been missing more than twice and thereby creating a new category of missing person: the 'repeat misper'. We adapted our computerised system so that it could specifically monitor and track these cases. A basic model of performance management was beginning to emerge.

We refined our approach to look in detail at factors such as age, gender, location, time, weekdays and months in which people go missing. Some interesting findings emerged such as a very significant peak in mental health patient missing episodes in the summer months and an unexpected peak in children missing from care during the autumn months. These were all fed in to the process to inform our response. It became clear to us that a 'one size fits all' approach to our problem solving was not likely to succeed, particularly at a tactical level.

We also gained an understanding of the various push and pull factors which lead to missing incidences. For example 'push' factors could include bullying or abuse within a particular care establishment whereas 'pull' factors could include the attraction to alcohol or substance misuse or criminality in the community and/or local addresses where young people are harboured in a permissive environment when missing, typically by those who were the repeat mispers of yesteryear but who are now housed nearby in the community.

The problem profiles conducted by our analysts confirmed our suspicions from the scanning process of a significant involvement of mispers in crime, drugs, substance and alcohol abuse, anti social behaviour, sexual exploitation and thus the obvious risk at which these vulnerable persons were repeatedly placing themselves. The profiles revealed that "…in Lancashire, young people are 5 times more likely to have drug and alcohol related problems than their peers, … there is a strong correlation between mispers and domestic violence and family protection issues, … and a large number of teenage female runaways are openly sexually active with a number known to have acted as prostitutes".

Several significant factors emerged from our analysis to inform our response. It emerged that the problem was simply being allowed to exist without any attempt at intervention. The root causes of the problems lay within the care establishments themselves. These were operated

by other agencies. The police alone had no influence over the causative factors. However, the problems created, although massive for the police and for the community, were not seen by the staff in those establishments as a particular problem for them. If a person went missing staff just rang the police and waited for officers to return the missing person – sometimes hours later - sometimes days later. The police bore the costs, the responsibility and the risks of dealing with the problem. The staff and the management of the establishments had little appreciation of the inordinate lengths to which the police went to investigate and resolve the case and of all the subsequent adverse effects. Meanwhile they were spared the responsibility and workload of looking after the individual for the duration of the missing episode.

At this time, response showed there was little enthusiasm to address the problem and even less belief that anything effective could be done. The police, lumbered with all the problems largely created by other agencies, were simply allowing this state of affairs to continue. There was no requirement or even encouragement for local beat officers to work with care establishments to address the problem. There was no organised attempt to introduce a POP approach to this area of work in spite of a problem analysis triangle that screamed out for such an approach. There was no strategic alliance with the organisations that operated the demand driving establishments; there was no widespread multi-agency or partnership work being conducted; there was no performance management of the problem where people were held to account for the volume of missing reports emanating from their establishments.

We were greatly encouraged by anecdotal evidence of occasional historic and sporadic police led initiatives whereby individual motivated officers had targeted specific demand driving establishments in isolation, formed an informal partnership with staff and tried to change attitudes and practice. These personality based initiatives had been very successful, albeit short lived. Typically, the problem would re-emerge when the motivated individual moved on or became frustrated at the lack of any strategic framework, organisational support or recognition.

Our emerging goal was to develop a system based upon our analysis which would produce sustainable reductions in repeat misper cases with all the associated benefits of releasing police resources to concentrate on crime and disorder, reducing that element of crime and disorder which was related to vulnerable people going missing from care and helping vulnerable individuals to fulfil their potential.

Response

The POP process followed the National Intelligence Model. Processes in divisions showed the problems that emanated from misper cases. This was highlighted as an issue at the Constabulary POP Steering Group and it seemed to be a concern across the whole force. We had to formulate our response in conjunction with Partners for us to make any impact on the misper problem.

Partners were not openly aware of the nature and size of the problem. We invited them to view the computerised system, to illustrate the high incidence of persons missing from care and the massive resource implications for the police. This formed a basis upon which all agencies can seek solutions. Our response was introduced into southern division, using the rest of the force as a control sample. We used the police working group to develop a strategic document with partners to prevent and manage missing person cases from the demand driving establishments – children's homes and mental health units.

Even at this early stage, in order to gain cooperation some leverage had to be applied. On one occasion we took the rather crude and unorthodox step of utilizing the local MP to draw attention to this problem in one town where local policing was in danger of grinding to a halt due to prolific repeat missing persons. Only after this intervention did we find that we were able to gain the full cooperation of senior representatives from some of the demand driving establishments. Subsequently, we have found other means of leverage such as the inspecting bodies of care establishments (National Care Standards Commission and Mental

Health Commission) but have found no need to actively involve them as our partners have now embraced the project with total commitment and perceive many benefits of their own.

The protocol was intended to respond to the causative factors of the high incidence of missing reports that lay within the children's homes. The following elements were included: information sharing between agencies, grading reporting which created a new category of missing person who was 'unauthorised absent' as opposed to 'missing', electronic reporting, shared ownership of the misper enquiry between the police and the care agency, independent debriefing of the misper following their return and programmed intervention by both agencies in respect of repeat mispers.

We appointed and trained a police liaison officer for each establishment, encouraging them to use a POP approach to address localised issues as they emerged. In respect of the private care homes and mental health wards. These officers developed similar protocols based on the Lancashire County Council protocol template. They assisted in raising awareness and in addressing missing person issues specific to that establishment. Local solutions included sanctions and reward regimes in children's homes, changes to a mental health ward fire escape mechanism, establishing a link between a hospital unit and town centre CCTV to assist the staff to recover an absent patient, use of the national care standards commission to provide leverage where difficulties existed with a particular children's home.

We introduced a multi-agency tasking and co-ordinating group (MA T&CG) involving partners, which meets quarterly. It is attended by representatives from partner agencies, including Lancashire County Council (social services department), ASG Care Services, Care Afloat (both private care organisations), the Lancashire Young Runaways Project Team (managed by The Children's Rights Service) Chorley and South Ribble NHS Trust, Southport and Ormskirk NHS Trust and Lancashire Connexions and the police liaison officers. The divisional analyst produces a quarterly report on the current position in respect of numbers and the nature of missing individuals from the demand driving agencies, upon which tasking is based. Where possible, the push and pull factors thought to cause the person to go missing are identified. These are obtained from the independent debriefs implemented as part of the protocol, and observations by the police liaison officers and partner representatives. Partners report on progress and successes at the next meeting, providing sustained accountability. We used the SARA model to continually refine our approach.

A Lancashire County Council representative worked with the police to develop the protocol, consulting at all levels within social services and with the Lancashire Young Runaways Project, to ensure the proposals are realistic and achievable. The representative worked with the force Missing From Home Champion to deliver joint training to front line staff and oversee implementation within social services. Lancashire County Council varied existing contracts with private care providers to ensure implementation involved all children in care, in Lancashire. Mangers from other demand driving agencies (mental health wards and private care establishments) worked closely with the police liaison officers to develop the subsidiary protocols and manage implementation locally. Senior managers from partner agencies sit on the MA T&CG. They examine the Analysts report in advance of the meetings and progress any actions concerning individuals placed at their care establishment or issues relating to the establishment itself.

consistent to allow for seasonal variations, which may affect numbers. The POP will also be assessed by identifying other positive outcomes, not initially identified as objectives but which will benefit the quality of missing person investigations, individuals who go missing or the community.

Assessment

Numbers of Repeat Misper Cases:

Quarterly Comparison	Southern Division	Rest of Force
July – September 2002	89	533
July – September 2003	72 (19% decrease)	622 (17% increase)
October – December 2002	151	546
October – December 2003	49 (68% decrease)	491 (10% decrease)
January – March 2003	88	388
January – March 2004	28 (68% decrease)	542 (40% increase)

Comparing July to September 2002 with July to September 2003, there was a 19% reduction in missing person reports in southern and a 17% increase for the rest of force. During this period, protocols were being developed, liaison officers appointed and the MA T&CG initiated.

Comparing October to December 2002 with October to December 2003 there was a 68% reduction in southern against a 10% decrease for the rest of force. During this period, elements of the protocol were clearly beginning to take effect. Training was delivered and the MA T&CG responded to its first quarterly report.

Comparing January to March 2003 with January to March 2004, there was a 68% reduction in Southern against a 40% increase for the rest of force. During this time, the overall strategies started to become established in southern.

We expect the reductions to improve in southern, as the strategies mature. It is planned that the strategies will be rolled out force-wide during 2004 and this will result in similar reductions in the other divisions. The new processes in southern have been incorporated into existing police roles, thereby establishing the strategies with no extra cost. Based on an average cost of £880.00 per missing person case, savings in southern division projected for a year are £209k and for similar reductions across the whole force, projected savings are estimated at £1.8m, which could be released to tackle crime and disorder.

Previously, within Lancashire, local police led initiatives have been undertaken sporadically and in isolation, where individual motivated officers had targeted specific demand driving

These reductions in missing incidents have positive outcomes for the individual young people in relation to a decrease in the likelihood of social marginalisation. The young people were putting themselves at risk of harm by simply being absent without any responsible person knowing their whereabouts. Others put themselves at risk specifically by responding to the 'pull' factors of crime or prostitution.

Independent debriefing and follow up work co-ordinated by social services resulted in the root causes of the missing incidents being addressed. Where the missing incidents have stopped, the young people now have an improved quality of life. One example concerns a young male in care who repeatedly went missing for long periods at a time. He was placing himself at risk by walking long distances to his home address. Bullying in the children's home caused the missing episodes. Now this has been addressed, he no longer goes missing. He is now going to school regularly and therefore has an improved quality of life. Another example concerns a young female in the care, who was going missing on average 20 times per month due to the 'pull' of a Schedule One offender. Social workers concentrated in creating positive aspects to the young person's life, which included formal arrangements to see her friends and boyfriend regularly. She no longer goes missing because she doesn't have the need to liaise with the Schedule One offender.

Carers have responded positively and welcome the enormous empowerment through decision making within their organisation and towards people in their care. In making fewer reports, they spend less time with missing enquiries and therefore more time with the young people in their care. Managers embrace the additional benefits of local police engagement. Through this POP, a nationally recognised computerised missing person system has been developed and implemented, which has aided quality improvements to investigations.

It is difficult to quantify the activities of repeat mispers from a crime and disorder perspective and associated costs to the police and the community. However, it is possible to illustrate this by displaying the incidence of offending over a period where missing behaviour was persistent.

One particular young person went missing repeatedly over a 12 month period. This was accompanied by a sharp increase in offending. He committed 17 crimes over a 12 month period March 2003 – March 2004. During this period he went missing 11 times. Prior to this period, he committed one offence and was missing on one occasion.

Based on a police cost of £387.00 per crime, the cost of this offending over the 12 month period is £4,257.00. Thus the police cost of each missing incident for this young person is not just £880.00 per case but £1460.00, taking into account the cost of processing and investigating the associated criminal activity. Therefore, by reducing the missing incidents by minimising the associated 'pull' factors, crime is also reduced, allowing resources to be released and made available to tackle crime and disorder.

During our analysis phase, we sought out other published misper reduction projects to use as a yardstick to compare our success. Our study of national research had inferred that if solutions could be found then significant reductions in missing person reports were possible. Our only finding was from a division in one police force, where the reductions were levelled at