



Policy opportunities for reducing missing episodes for children in out-of-home care

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August 2026

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Acknowledgment of Country

The Australian Public Policy Institute acknowledges the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation and the Ngunnawal people upon whose ancestral lands our Institute stands.

We pay respect to Elders both past and present, acknowledging them as the traditional custodians of knowledge for these lands. We celebrate the diversity of Aboriginal peoples and their ongoing cultures and connections to the lands and waters of Australia.



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The Institute is an independent, non-partisan policy institute with charitable status. This paper was made possible through an APPI Policy Challenge Grant. This annual grant program supports academics who seek to tackle the greatest public policy challenges facing Australia.

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Acknowledgements

Thank you to colleagues from the Australian Public Policy Institute and the University of Sydney for sharing insights throughout the project. We thank the professionals in health, juvenile justice, child protection and out-of-home care who were consulted, including Aboriginal community leaders who provided valuable feedback on the lived experiences of Aboriginal children in the out-of-home care system. The conditions of the ethics agreement for this project required confidentiality, so they are not named in the report. These conditions did not allow a separate analysis of the experiences of Aboriginal children as distinct cohorts.

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Recommended citation: Stefanie Schurer, Amy Conley Wright, Judy Cashmore, Andrew Mallos, Irene Wardle, & Betty Luu "Policy opportunities for reducing missing episodes for children in out-of-home care", APPI Policy Insights Paper (2026).



Executive summary

Children and young people who go missing while in out-of-home care are among Australia's most vulnerable populations. Despite efforts by governments to better understand why this happens and how young people can be better supported to ensure their safety and wellbeing, the drivers of this issue remain poorly understood. Police and child protection systems require a clearer understanding of contributing factors of these episodes to inform more effective, coordinated prevention and intervention responses tailored to the needs of these young people.

Children and young people who go missing while in out-of-home care face heightened risks of exploitation, violence and disengagement from education and health services, with potentially severe and long-term impacts on their safety and wellbeing. Oversight bodies and inquiries have consistently identified the need for stronger evidence to better understand the factors contributing to these episodes and to support more effective, coordinated responses across education, police and child protection systems.

This report analyses records from the NSW Human Services Dataset to estimate the prevalence of children who go missing from care and identify risk factors. These findings are complemented by insights from sector professionals to identify opportunities for system and policy reform.

The study found that between 2000 and 2019, a total of 1,684 episodes (1,149 unique children) of children missing from care were recorded.

From this data, **three key risk factors were identified:**

1

AGE ENTERING OUT-OF-HOME CARE

Young people in this cohort enter care for the first time at a much older age (most enter at age 10 or later) and are thus older when leaving care permanently than children who have never had a missing episode.

2

PLACEMENT TYPE

It is significantly more likely for children placed in residential care, hotel or alternative care arrangements and independent living to go missing. Children in kinship care and in their parents' care did not differ significantly in risk.

3

PLACEMENT INSTABILITY

On average, children who went missing had significantly higher instability in their placements while in care than those who never went missing, with more planned moves, more disruptions whereby their placement ended unexpectedly, a greater number of changes in the circumstances of the carer, and relationship breakdown between carer and the child.



Tracking children who go missing from care using administrative datasets beyond the out-of-home care system revealed that most of these children quickly presented elsewhere within public services, such as schools or hospitals. Due to data sharing limitations, however, this information was not flagged in out-of-home care records. This highlights the significant opportunity for information sharing across agencies.

These findings highlight key policy opportunities to improve the safety of children at risk of going missing from care. These opportunities include strengthening networks around vulnerable children, bolstering integrated service delivery models, implementing annual reviews for children in out-of-home care, increasing the availability of stable placement options and exploring real-time data linkage to enable better tracking of youth who are away from their placements.

By providing the first linked, population-scale analysis of this challenge in NSW – with data, modelling and statistical analysis contained in the authors' working paper, [*Going missing from state care is rare, but marked by profound vulnerability: Population-scale evidence on modifiable risk factors from the NSW Human Services Dataset, 2000–2019*](#) – these complementary studies establish a foundation for coordinated, evidence-based policy responses that shift the focus from crisis management to risk-targeted prevention and long-term support.



Policy opportunities – at a glance

1 Strengthen the network of relationships around vulnerable children

Children who go missing from care may intentionally do so because they fear risk of harm or because they are seeking connection and belonging. There must, therefore, be relational practice to build trust. For Aboriginal young people, this work is best led by Aboriginal community-controlled organisations.

2 Bolster integrated service delivery models

Enhanced collaboration between child protection agencies, police, education providers, health care services and Aboriginal organisations is needed to improve prevention and intervention for children who are missing from placement. Schools are at the frontline of safeguarding children, so investing in additional training and service integration could enhance early identification and support for children at risk.

3 Improve placement options and stability

Investment should be made in trauma-informed, culturally safe, and community-led alternatives to residential care, youth refuges and hotels/alternative care arrangements (the types of placements most associated with children who go missing from care).

4 Initiate an annual review of children in care

An annual review of the health, safety and wellbeing of children in care that includes a focus on monitoring all incidents of missing from care is required to promote accountability and drive practice improvements.

5 Explore linking data in real time to enable real-time safeguarding children who go missing from care.

A secure, cross-agency data sharing platform with non-government organisations and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations inclusion could enable timely identification of children who are missing and coordinated responses.

Scope limitation. Going missing from state care is rare but marked by profound vulnerability. This study was limited in its scope by the conditions laid out in the existing data sharing agreement and what was deemed feasible within the given time frame to abide by Indigenous Data Sovereignty principles. The analyses in this study therefore were not able to address the particular ‘missing from care’ experiences of Aboriginal children. The data sharing agreement allowed for analysis of data of all children in out-of-home care, including Aboriginal children. We requested Aboriginal status as a variable for the cohort of young people in care, on the condition that we were not to analyse and report on Aboriginal children and youth as a discrete cohort. Aboriginality was included as a control variable in the regression modelling and tested for significance in the [working paper](#). Within these limitations, it is clear that Aboriginal children are significantly different in their risk of being missing from care.

Consultation with Aboriginal community leaders indicated that it would be important to study the experiences of Aboriginal children missing from care as a distinct group. We therefore recommend that future research focus on this question, led by an Aboriginal research team with expertise in child protection.



Policy background

Children who go missing while in care represent one of Australia's most vulnerable cohorts. In NSW, and other Australian jurisdictions, missing episodes in the out-of-home care system are treated as critical incidents that trigger immediate safeguarding responses, including police notification, risk assessment, welfare checks and placement reviews upon return.

Despite recognition of the vulnerability of this cohort, there has been minimal population-level analysis in NSW to quantify how many children spend time unaccounted for while in care, the outcomes of these episodes, or what can be learned from these children's interactions with other public services.

Reports from oversight bodies and inquiries have highlighted that children who go missing from care are particularly vulnerable to exploitation, violence and disengagement from education and health services.¹ However, these concerns are primarily framed as operational or case-level risks rather than as a system-level policy challenge.

National and state child protection strategies, including the *National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children* and NSW child safety and casework policies, emphasise stability, trauma-informed care and protection from harm as key principles of Australia's out-of-home care system. Yet existing responses to children who are identified as not being in placement remain largely reactive and fragmented across government agencies.

Children who are missing from out-of-home care frequently interact with multiple service systems, including policing, health, housing, education and youth justice. As a result, missing episodes are not solely a child protection issue, but a cross-agency policy challenge requiring coordinated government responses and shared accountability across agencies.

Within the existing system, there is limited capacity to identify children at the highest risk of going missing or to monitor long-term outcomes from interventions. This absence of system intelligence constrains prevention and early intervention and limits the ability of government to assess the broader social and economic impacts of missing from care episodes.

NSW is currently undertaking significant reform of the out-of-home care system, including new investment in therapeutic care, placement stability and evidence-informed service delivery.² In addition, at the time of this report's publication, the NSW Ombudsman is conducting an inquiry into the experiences of children and young people who spend time away from Intensive Therapeutic Care placements, a form of residential care used in NSW. However, limited longitudinal evidence³ exists to inform how missing from care episodes fit within broader pathways of vulnerability and system contact.

With the release of the NSW Government's new out-of-home care strategy and the NSW Ombudsman's inquiry, research into children who spend time unaccounted for while in care offers timely and data-informed insights to guide investment toward a system that better supports the safety and wellbeing of all children and young people.

Harms faced by children who go missing from care

Children missing from care often experience serious harms that can have devastating and long-term consequences. The limited body of research highlights that youth missing from care constitute a highly at-risk group for violence and exploitation.⁴

In the Australian context, two reports examining children who are reported as missing from care – Victoria's 2021 systemic inquiry into residential care and McFarlane's 2021 review of Australian police data – outline the experiences of children while missing from care.⁵



These reports describe experiences of sexual exploitation, abuse and assault, as well as involvement in crime and substance use. They highlight poor physical and mental well-being and the absence of safe or stable accommodation during missing episodes. Importantly, both reports highlight significant gaps in the recording and monitoring of children's experiences while missing.

Alongside immediate risks to safety and wellbeing, children who go missing from care are also vulnerable to longer-term developmental harms. An important concern is how children can be effectively supported once they reengage with care. Disrupted placements and placement instability can have several flow-on effects, one of which is a higher likelihood of repeat missing episodes. A missing episode can, in some instances, jeopardise their current placement and result in more restrictive placement settings on their return.⁶

Periods of being missing from care can also interrupt schooling, which may adversely impact young people's future employment prospects.⁷ Additionally, placement instability can result in further disruptions to education, when children need to move schools and lose access to community ties. Research indicates that student mobility has a detrimental impact on educational outcomes (attainment, progress and school completion). Moves made during the year (between terms or during term time) have an even greater negative impact than moves made between grades.⁸ Access to other health or vital services may also be interrupted when children go missing from care.⁹

Current understandings of why children go missing from care

Children who go spend time from care without permission are a difficult-to-reach population so the particular reasons why they are missing and what happens to them when they are uncertain.

Previous research has found that children may spend time from care for a range of reasons associated with a combination of 'push' (getting from) and pull (going toward) factors.¹⁰ They may leave their placements to return to, or reconnect with, family members, to live with peers, partners or friends, or to gain autonomy in their lives and get away from negative social interactions with placement staff and peers.¹¹

There is evidence that risk is heightened for children placed in residential care settings compared with those in foster or kinship care or other home-like environments.¹² Having multiple placements has also been found to be associated with higher risk of youth going missing.¹³ Victoria's inquiry found that placement instability and flaws in the model of care were significant contributions to children leaving their placements.¹⁴

A greater understanding of these factors would help to inform police and child protection professionals, both in policy and practice. It would also contribute to efforts to improve prevention and intervention efforts that are holistic and responsive to these children's needs.



Estimating the prevalence and risk factors of children missing from care

This research uses linked administrative data held within the NSW Human Services Dataset to estimate the prevalence, risk factors and service use patterns of children who go missing from care in NSW. These findings can inform policies to better support children in the out-of-home care system.

The Human Services Dataset contains de-identified data collected through the administration of different NSW Government services and some Commonwealth Government supports (i.e., Medicare and Centrelink). The scale of the Human Services Dataset is unprecedented in NSW, containing information from all NSW residents born on or after 1 January 1990 (the Primary Cohort) and their relatives (i.e., family members, guardians and carers – the Secondary Cohort).

This study focused on the full population of 52,042 children who had their first appearance in the out-of-home care system since 1999 and exited care between January 2000 to December 2019. This timeframe was selected due to challenges presented by COVID-19 lockdown periods in 2020 and 2021, which had significant impacts on some of the service delivery reported in datasets informing this research. For most of the regression analyses (detail in the [corresponding working paper](#)), the sample is restricted to children with a placement ending between 2010 and 2019, to ensure a focus on recent data and policy-relevant conditions in out-of-home care.

The out-of-home care data contain information on the reason a child exits a placement, including by a 'Child Young Person (CYP) Missing' marker. This information was used to identify the number of times young people went missing from care, when the missing episodes occurred and the length of each missing episode.

Using a unique person identifier, the out-of-home care data were linked with other administrative datasets to assess where and when children who were missing were seen again, and whether their system contact differs from never-missing children during and after their time in care. Contact with service systems was considered for education (school attendance), police (as victim or person of interest), justice (juvenile and adult records), health care (emergency department visits and hospitalisation) and housing (homelessness and social housing usage).

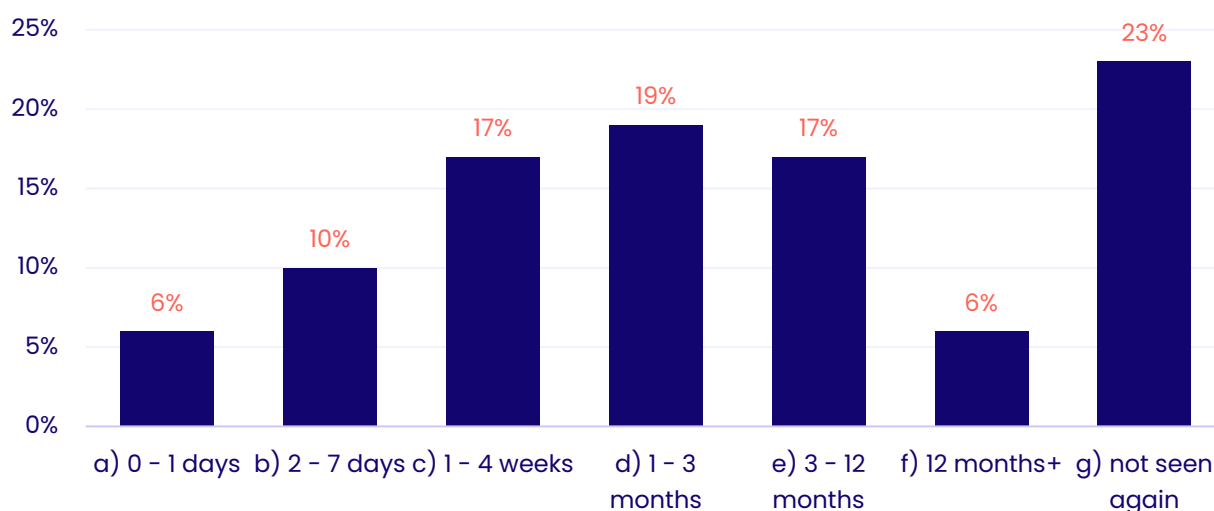
Prevalence of children missing from care

Between 2000 and 2019, the data recorded 1,684 instances where children exited as missing, involving 1,149 individual children and young people. Overall, these cases represent an average of 0.5 per cent of all recorded exit episodes (317,622).

The number of missing at exit cases has decreased from a maximum of 1.1 per cent of cases in 2001, to 0.5 per cent in 2010 and to 0.3 per cent in 2019. It is possible that this change is a reflection of data entry rather than the underlying phenomenon, as children in out-of-home care became increasingly case managed by non-governmental organisations following the 2008 Special Commission of Inquiry into Child Protection Services in NSW.¹⁵

Most children re-entered care following an exit as missing (77 per cent), with the majority returning within three months (52 per cent). Less than one in 10 (8 per cent) re-entered care after 12 months of spending time missing from care. About one in four are not observed to re-enter care (23 per cent) (Figure 1).

Of those with recorded missing episodes, most went missing once (67 per cent), but one in five went missing twice (20 per cent), and almost one in eight children went missing three or more times (13 per cent).

**Figure 1 | Time to re-appearance in out-of-home care following exit as missing**

Note: Reappeared within a) 0-1 days, b) 2-7 days, c) 1-4 weeks, d) 1-3 months, e) 3-12 months, f) 12 months or more, g) not seen again in out-of-home care records.

Key characteristics of children who go missing from out-of-home care

Gender

Female children and young people are overrepresented in this cohort. They comprised 59.7 per cent of children who have a missing from care episode compared with 48.8 per cent of all children in care without a missing episode (Table 1).

Age at entry into and exit from care

Children who have been recorded as missing from care tend to enter care at an older age, with almost two in three (62.7 per cent) entering care for the first time at age 10 or older. Conversely, nearly two in three (62.4 per cent) children who never go missing enter care for the first time before age six.

The average age at which youth exit care for the final time is 15.7 years old for those who have an exit as missing and 9 years old for those who never go missing.

Placement types

Foster care is the most common placement type in the NSW out-of-home care system. It accounts for 70.9 per cent of care episodes that do not record a missing at exit episodes, and 44.6 per cent of those with at least one missing at exit episode.

The second most common placement type is relative or kinship care. It accounts for 17.5 per cent of care episodes that do not record a missing at exit instance, and 13.3 per cent of missing at exit episodes.

Less common were placement episodes in hotel/alternative care arrangements (1.1 per cent versus 2.2 per cent), independent living arrangements (0.7 per cent versus 5.2 per cent), residential care (2.2 per cent versus 10.9 per cent) and youth refuges (1.2 per cent versus 10.3 per cent). For each of the less common placement types, missing episodes were significantly more common.

**Table 1 | Placement type across all episodes, by ever missing from care status**

PLACEMENT TYPE	Never missing	Ever missing	Number of care episodes in category for children	
			Never missing	Ever missing
Foster care	70.9%	44.6%	214,665	6,648
Kinship care	17.5%	13.3%	52,936	1,983
Residential care	2.2%	10.9%	6,537	1,622
Other/ undefined	1.2%	1.0%	3483	147
Parents	3.4%	3.8%	10,161	567
Hotel/ alternative care arrangement	1.1%	2.2%	3,472	331
Independent living	0.7%	5.2%	2,210	775
Youth refuge	1.2%	10.3%	3,486	1,536
Juvenile justice	0.2%	3.5%	534	517
Non-related person	1.2%	1.9%	3,652	276
Self-placed, not authorised	0.4%	2.4%	1,335	355
Absent location unknown	0.1%	1.0%	249	145
TOTAL NUMBER OF CARE EXIT EPISODES			302,720	14,902



Placement disruptions

Children with missing from care episodes had significantly more interruptions or changes in circumstance across their out-of-home care placements than those without missing episodes. They were more likely to have had a planned move (75.6 per cent versus 67.0 per cent), an unplanned end of placement (52.0 per cent versus 11.9 per cent), a change in circumstance of the carer (24.3 per cent versus 15.2 per cent), a relationship breakdown (16.5 per cent versus 3.9 per cent), and were more likely to 'self-restore' by returning to their parents without authorisation from courts (17.8 per cent versus 3.9 per cent).

Risk of missing episodes per placement type (2010 – 2019 data)

Focusing on a more recent sample of final exit episodes that occurred between 2010 and 2019, to reflect more recent context and design of out-of-home care policies, it is possible to identify the risk of children going missing from each placement type. For this purpose, a standard multivariate regression modelling approach where the outcome variable is missing from care was used.¹⁶

In restricting the dates of final exit episodes, the sample provides 215,907 total care episodes, with 949 missing at exit instances involving 744 individual children and young people. Foster care placement, the most common out-of-home care placement type, was used as the baseline for quantifying relative risk.

The main risk factors were:



PLACEMENT TYPE

Risk of missing episodes from foster care placements was slightly less than half a percent (0.44 per cent), roughly on par with kinship care or being placed with parents. The strongest predictor of going missing from care is placement in a youth refuge. Relative to foster care placements at the baseline, these young people have an increased risk of almost 15 times. Other significant placement types are residential care (2.8 times) and hotels and alternative care arrangements (2.0 times).



GENDER

Males had increased risk of missing episodes in residential care (3.6 times), hotels/alternative care arrangements (2.6 times) and independent care arrangements (5 times), respectively. For girls, an increased risk of missing episodes is primarily associated with residential care; they are 2.4 times more likely to spend time missing from care than those in foster care. The increased relative risk of going missing when placed in a youth refuge is also greater for boys (17.5 times) than for girls (11.9 times).



Public service usage following a missing from care episode

The analysis in this study identified when children missing from care accessed a range of public services. This informs opportunities to better safeguard children who have been reported as missing. In many cases, young people reported as missing appear across multiple other public services.

The NSW Human Services Dataset (2010–2019) enables out-of-home care data to be linked with data from a selection of other administrative datasets, capturing services accessed by young people in NSW. Identifying the date when a child is recorded as missing from the out-of-home care system allows analysis of when and how often they accessed other public services, both before and after exiting care. Apart from schooling, all services indicate vulnerability or exposure to adversity. The vast majority of children who went missing from care or had a missing episode from 2010 to 2019 could be found through their encounters with other public services (97.1 per cent). This is true even for the 182 children who never re-entered out-of-home care following a missing episode (91.8 per cent were identified in other public service systems following their missing episode). There were 22 children who spent time missing from care and who could not be identified again in other administrative systems or in care. It is possible these children left the state.

Just over half of the children who went missing from care (54.3 per cent) were observed within one week of being recorded as missing in other administrative systems and 90 per cent were observed at least once within three months.



Schools: Four out of 10 children missing from care can be found in school attendance data within the first week of being recorded as missing (39.3 per cent) and over one in two within the first three months (55.2 per cent).



Police records: Almost one in 20 appear as a victim in police data within seven days of being reported as missing (4.5 per cent), and over one in four (27.7 per cent) appear in the system within three months. More than one in 10 appear in police records as a person of interest within seven days (12.3 per cent), and more than one in two (53.6 per cent) within three months.



Hospital: Almost one in three (30.5 per cent) present at least once to an emergency department within three months and just over one in five (21.5 per cent) are admitted to hospital.



Juvenile justice: Almost one in five (19.8 per cent) have a juvenile justice record within three months of being reported as missing and one in three within a year (31.2 per cent).



Housing: Very few children missing from care use social housing services or homelessness services within a year of being recorded as missing from care.

Patterns of public service usage outside out-of-home care services

The patterns of public service usage highlight the high degree of vulnerability of children missing from care, both during their time in out-of-home care but also after their exit from care.

Understanding how children utilise public services, during care and after exiting care helps identify potential risk factors, as well as highlighting opportunities for intervention and deeper insight into the challenges they have experienced.



Public service usage *before* exiting the out-of-home care system as missing

Children who exited care as missing had higher levels of engagement with public services prior to spending time as missing from care. Their contact with services beyond out-of-home care, compared with children who exited care for other reasons, reflects a greater vulnerability.

While still in care, children who would go on to be missing were (Figure 2):

10.2 x

more likely to **have a record in the juvenile justice system**

(41.9 per cent versus 4.1 per cent)

1.6 x

more likely to **have a record in police data as a victim**

(92.2 per cent versus 58.2 per cent)

6.9 x

more likely to **have a record in the adult justice system**

(66.3 per cent versus 9.6 per cent)

2.8 x

more likely to **have a record in emergency services and homelessness services**

(28.6 per cent versus 10.1 per cent)

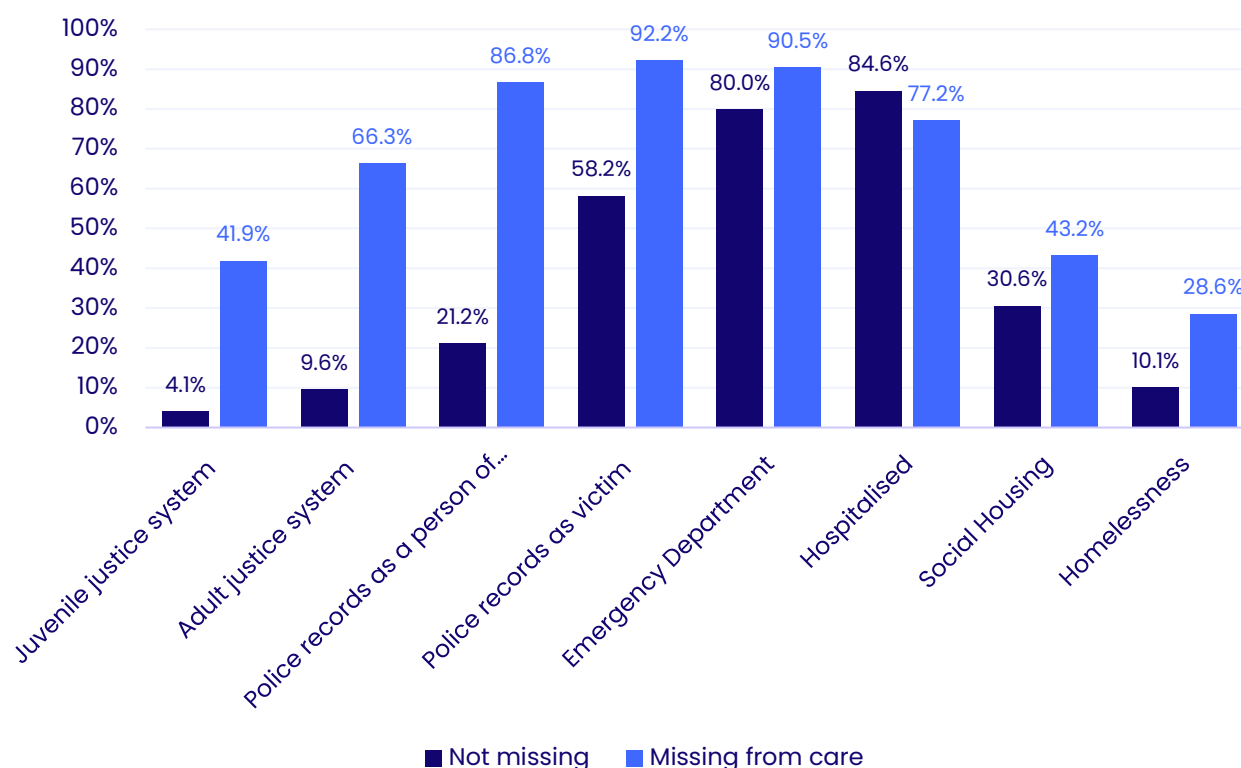
4.1 x

more likely to **have a record in the police data as a person of interest**

(86.8 per cent versus 21.2 per cent)

Notably, children who would exit care as missing were less likely to be admitted to hospital (77.2 per cent and 84.6 per cent) and were only marginally more likely to present to an emergency department (90.5 per cent versus 80 per cent).

Figure 2 | Risk of contact with the system before exiting care





Public service use *after* exiting the out-of-home care system having had a missing episode

Children who exited care as missing had at least twice the level of contact with other public services compared with children who exited the out-of-care home system for any other reason. Understanding which services children use after exiting care helps identify potential points for further contact and support, as well as the challenges they face post-care.

After their final exit from care, those who exited having previously had a missing from care episode were, on average (Figure 3):

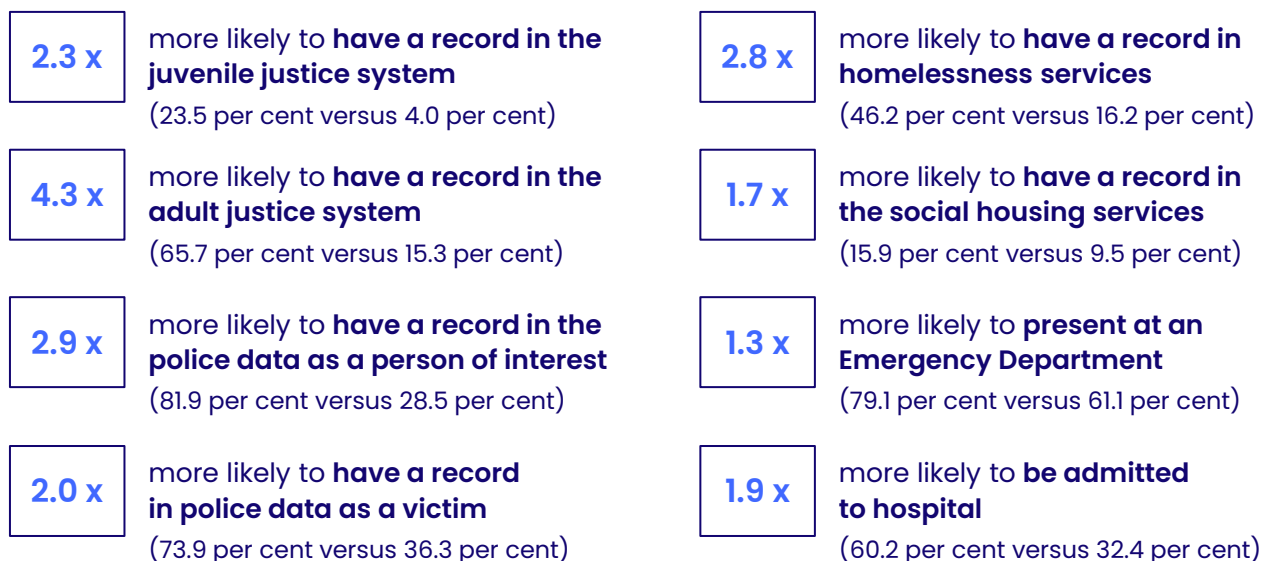
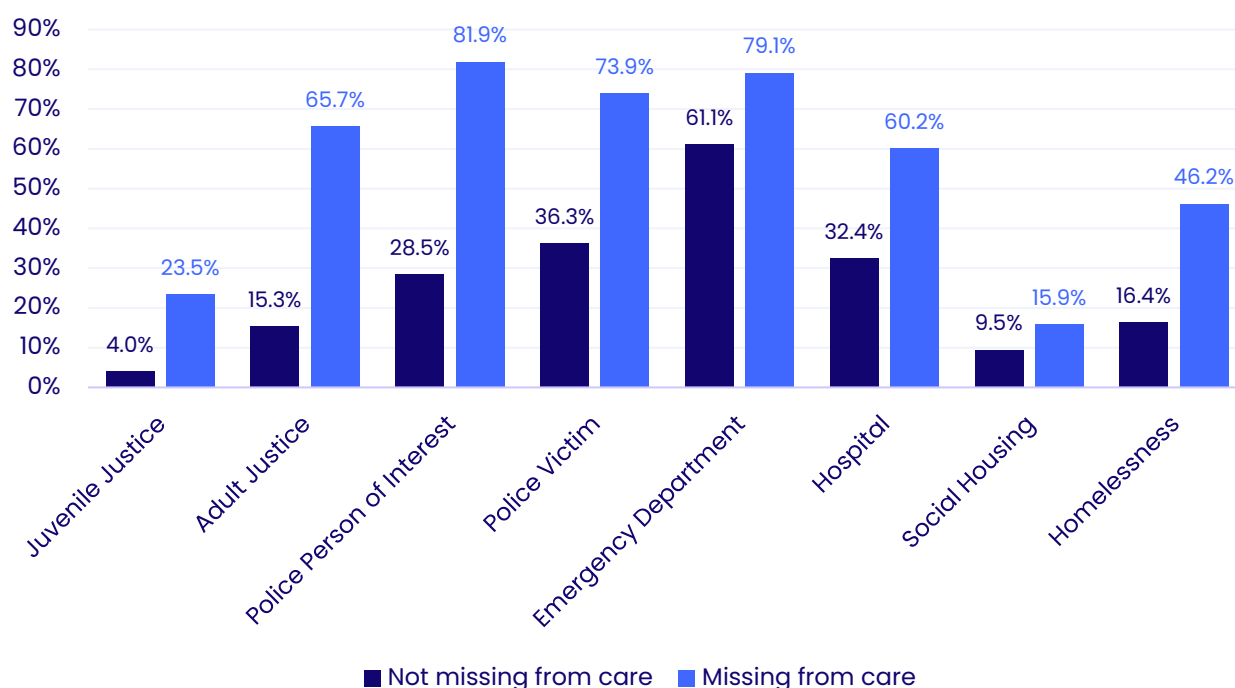


Figure 3 | Risk of contact with the system *after* final exit from care





Missing from care and police contact

Spending time missing from care significantly increases the risk of later police contact, particularly as a person of interest, even after controlling for prior risk factors (e.g., previous contact with police).

Four out of five youths who had a missing episode could be identified, after exiting the out-of-home care system, in police records as a person of interest (POI). Almost 3 in 4 were identified as a victim (73.9 per cent).

Most of the children who went missing from care were already in contact with police systems before they exited care as missing (86.8 per cent as a person of interest, and 92 per cent as a victim).

Police contact as a victim

Overall, the analysis suggests that having been identified as missing from care at final exit significantly increases the risk of contact with police as a victim (Table 3, Panel A). Relative to the base risk of victimhood before going missing of 59 per cent, there was an increase in relative risk by 7.5 per cent, equivalent to an additional one in 13 children.

Further analysis by gender reveals that this estimate is statistically significant only for males; their risk of victimhood increased by 8.2 per cent. For females, the risk increases only by 3.4 per cent.

Contact with police as a person of interest

Relative to the baseline risk of contact with police as a person of interest (22.7 per cent), having a missing episode is associated an increase in risk of 23.3 per cent, which is equivalent to an additional one in four children. The increased risk was estimated to be larger for females (34.0 per cent) than for males (16.5 per cent), relative to their baseline risks. For girls, this implied an additional one in three youth.

Missing from care and high-risk, high-use services

Analysis of post-care service use shows that not all young people experience the same level of risk of going missing from care. While some have little or no contact with public services, others have sustained and intensive engagement across health, housing, and justice systems. A fuller analysis of these dynamics of system contact is available in the paper, [*Going missing from state care is rare, but marked by profound vulnerability: Population-scale evidence on modifiable risk factors from the NSW Human Services Dataset, 2000–2019*](#).

Children who go missing from care were disproportionately represented among those with the highest levels of service use. Children who go missing from care share similar patterns of service use after exiting care, characterised by frequent and wide-ranging contact with multiple public services.

It indicates that these children have complex and overlapping needs, including significant health and housing challenges, as well as elevated safety risks through contact with the police and justice system.

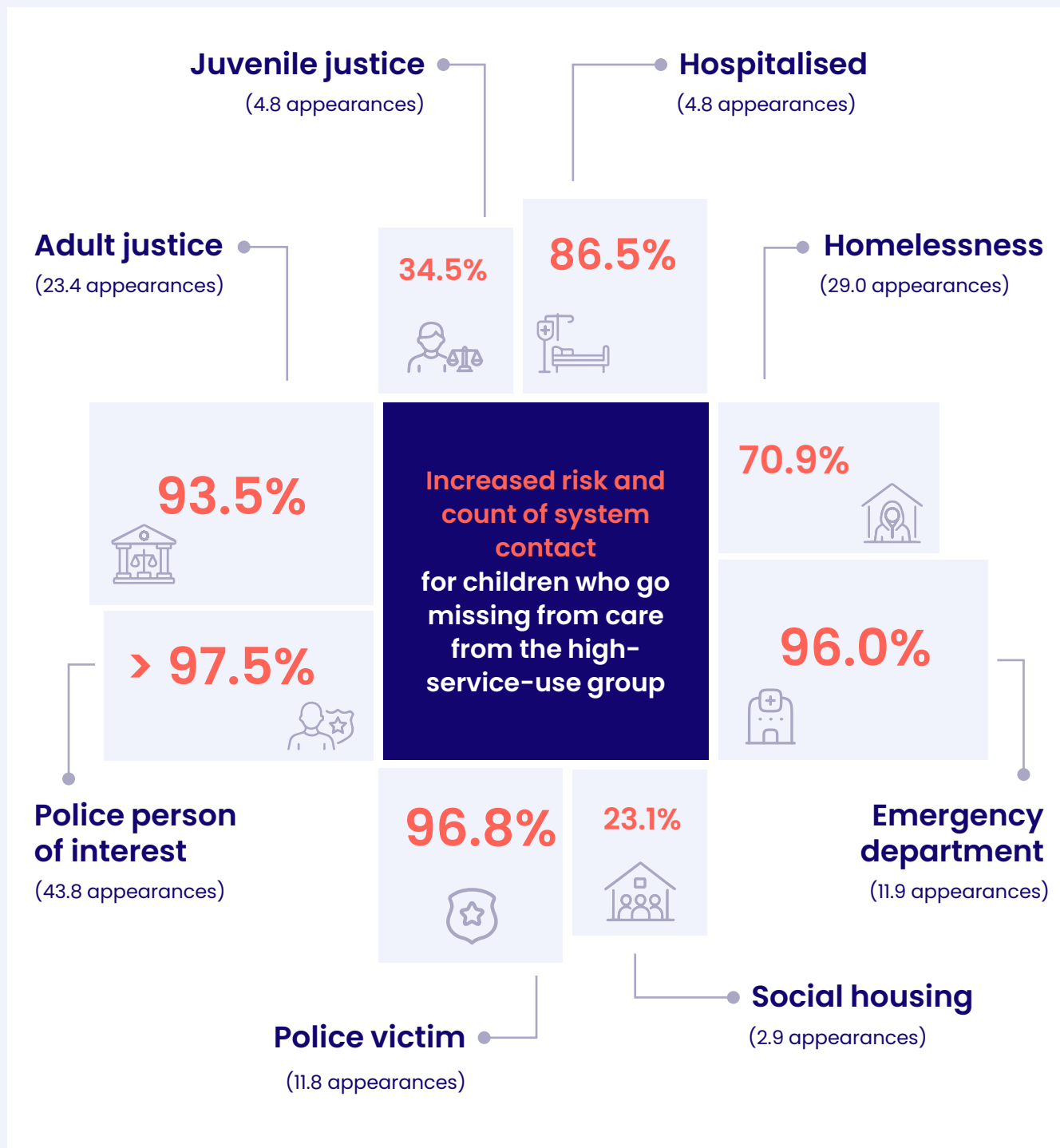
Relative to a baseline probability of 13.8 per cent, children who go missing from care have an 87.7 per cent higher risk of falling into this high-service-use group – equivalent to almost doubling their likelihood.

This effect is observed for both boys and girls. Missing from care increases the likelihood of high service use by 75.9 per cent for girls and 91.1 per cent for boys, relative to their respective baseline risks.

Understanding these shared patterns highlights that children who go missing from care are not an arbitrary group. Rather, they represent a cohort with concentrated disadvantages and risk, for whom earlier identification and coordinated service responses may be particularly important.



Figure 4 | Increased risk and count of system contact for children who go missing from care from the high-service-use group





A policy reform agenda for NSW

Children who go missing from care are some of the most vulnerable in our society, and a policy agenda focused on this cohort is critical for their safety and wellbeing.

To better understand how the data reflects the lived experiences of those working in the out-of-home care system and identify how the system can better support this group of young people, we sought guidance from key stakeholders in child protection, justice and health. They were asked to provide context on the experiences of children who spend time unaccounted from placement and potential approaches to protect these children.

Many of the interviewees were surprised by the scale of the problem and that many of the children could be found again in other administrative data sources. They had mixed views on the reasons why children go missing from care: some said that children wanted to return to their biological families, others argued that they might have left the state, which means they are no longer reflected in NSW data. Some were worried that children might hide with an adult with whom they have involvement.

From the data and lived experience insights, opportunities emerged for government action to strengthen the NSW out-of-home care system. These opportunities can inform prevention and early intervention efforts.

1

Strengthen the network of relationships around vulnerable children and young people.

This analysis shows that children in temporary placements and residential care are the most vulnerable to being reported as missing. These findings align with the growing body of research, which identifies placement instability and a lack of connection and belonging as key drivers of children going missing from their placements.¹⁷ This was further supported by information provided in interviews with sector stakeholders.

Children often leave their care arrangements to be with family and peers. The data indicate that these missing episodes frequently occur from placements that fail to meet their needs, including for positive social relationships and a sense of belonging.¹⁸ In this context, going missing may reflect responses to past traumas or perceived threats, as well as efforts to seek connection elsewhere.¹⁹

For Aboriginal children, there can be a powerful pull to Country and connections with Kin and Community.²⁰ Going to the familiar can be a source of comfort, even when the current circumstances of family and peer groups are uncertain.

Strengthening the supports to meet children's relational and emotional needs through their placement and to promote contact and visits with important people in their lives are important policy imperatives in out-of-home care.

The APPI report, *Supporting Children and Families to Flourish*, reimagines how the NSW Child Protection system can be redesigned around a child connection system, offering opportunities to focus the system holistically on the needs of the child. Such a system would ensure that child protection practitioners prioritise (family) relationships, make service solutions child-centred, empower families and emphasise listening and building trust.²¹

As the NSW Government rebuilds its out-of-home care system, it will be vital that relational care models are embedded across the system. In designing care settings, it is critical that children and young people have consistent carers and staff who have the capacity and time to build trust and meaningful relationships with them.



Children in out-of-home care generally have a history of trauma and abuse²² and may be exposed to further maltreatment, bullying by their peers and exploitation by others.²³ Their willingness and opportunity to safely disclose their challenges and traumas require skilled workers who can help children develop trust. Constant staff turnover and poorly resourced staff undermine any effort to build lasting relationships. It was recommended that when there is disclosure of abuse or other harm to a staff member, there needs to be systems in place to ensure handover among staff about the child's history, triggers, vulnerabilities and needed supports.

For Aboriginal children and young people, services must be designed to be culturally safe and delivered by Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations.

By working closely with children and young people, practitioners can identify and address the risks associated with going missing from care, such as substance abuse, sexual exploitation and homelessness, and tailor support to individual needs and circumstances. This promotes greater safety for those engaging in risk-associated behaviours by fostering a trusting relationship with practitioners, built on autonomy and respect, which encourages safer decision-making and increased engagement with support services.²⁴

2

Bolster integrated service delivery models wrapped around children.

Ensuring enhanced collaboration across service systems is critical to improving strategies for effective prevention and intervention. This study found that while one in four children who go missing from care are never observed again in out-of-home care records, almost all of them appear in the administrative records of other agencies.

In NSW, the Family Connect and Support service could be utilised to support cross-agency collaboration in supporting families and youth by not just directing families to the service at the appropriate time (outside child protection) but by actively coordinating collaboration across the Department of Communities and Justice, out-of-home care agencies, health agencies, police, Aboriginal services and, most importantly, education providers.²⁵

Schools are on the frontline of safeguarding children at risk of going missing from care, as the primary point of contact for families with school-aged children and often a continuing connection for children missing from care. This research shows that 39.3 per cent of children missing from care can be found in school within the first week of being missing, rising to 55.2 per cent within three months. This positions schools as critical partners in early identification and response.

The UK's policy approach to addressing children missing from the system provides a useful case study. The *Make Runaways Safe* report estimates that 100,000 children in the UK run away each year, with around one-third experiencing difficulties in school. This report highlights the role of teachers in identifying early warning signs, such as distress, disengagement, and repeated absences, and recommends enhanced training to support this function.²⁶ The UK Department for Education has subsequently introduced statutory guidance requiring schools and local authorities to identify children at risk of missing education and strengthen cross-agency collaboration.²⁷

In NSW, education staff already follow many of the same guidelines recommended in the UK. For instance, NSW education staff are mandatory reporters: they are legally required to report suspected risk of harm to the appropriate authorities. Teachers play a crucial role in early intervention by identifying the signs of harm and recognising the cumulative risk factors that may affect a child's safety and wellbeing. Governments should enhance the capacity of schools to identify and respond to children at risk of going missing from care by funding specialised training, strengthening information-sharing protocols, and embedding schools more systematically within cross-agency responses.



3 Implement an annual review of children in out-of-home care.

There is currently limited oversight or data regarding children's experiences of safety and harm in out-of-home care in NSW.

The NSW Government could consider implementing an annual, independent review of the health, safety and wellbeing of children in out-of-home care, providing a mechanism to capture detailed, circumstance-level information on missing episodes. This could be modelled on New Zealand's approach. New Zealand's *Safety of Children in Care Annual Report* provides a structured, yearly review of verified harm experienced by children in state care.²⁸ Data are reported by placement type in order to promote accountability for continuous improvement in child safety.

For NSW, annual reporting by the Department of Communities and Justice could provide a structured and transparent mechanism to assess whether children's rights and needs are consistently met. Embedding a focus on children who go missing from care would strengthen this safeguard. Systematic monitoring of each missing incident would build a clearer understanding of the drivers of missing episodes – whether from safety concerns, relationship breakdowns or other reasons. These insights could inform evidence-based interventions to prevent missing episodes and enable a more timely and effective response when they do occur.

4 Improve placement options and stability.

Children who are most likely to go missing from care are those who enter care at an older age (age 10 and upwards) and have been in refuges, temporary accommodation and residential placements. These forms of care are used when no foster or kinship placement is available and are more common for older children or those with complex needs.

Interviews with key stakeholders indicated that these placements frequently lack the relational stability and trauma-informed support required to foster healing and resilience. Australian and international research consistently indicates that placement instability is associated with poorer developmental, educational and psychosocial outcomes for children.²⁹

Addressing this risk requires prioritising access to stable, family-based placements for children at elevated risk of going missing. This could include reserving or prioritising foster care placements for high-risk cohorts, including children currently in refuges and those with high levels of service system contact. Providing earlier access to stable placements may reduce the likelihood of children going missing from their placements and support better long-term outcomes.

For children with complex behavioural or emotional needs, it is particularly important that NSW increases the availability of therapeutic and specialised foster care models. These models combine the benefits of a family environment with access to tailored clinical supports. Therapeutic residential care in Australia is intentionally focused on establishing relationships that are based on trust and can be a mechanism for healing trauma. This includes practices by staff to connect with the young person and foster family engagement wherever possible. Where residential care is unavoidable, therapeutic care models emphasising relational practices are preferable.³⁰

Placement strategies should also reflect gender differences in risk. For girls, the likelihood of going missing from care is more strongly associated with residential care. This suggests a need to prioritise transitions out of residential settings for girls, particularly those in high-risk groups.



These challenges are occurring in the context of broader system constraints. While NSW strives to ensure all children are placed in foster and kinship places, the pool of foster carers has been shrinking, despite continued population growth. Between 2021 and 2024, the number of authorised foster carers decreased by 13 per cent, and the number of annual applications fell by 17 per cent.³¹ In 2025 and 2026, the NSW Government has launched new initiatives aimed at increasing the number of foster carers, including the provision of crisis payments to emergency foster carers.³²

Strengthening early intervention and intensive family support services may reduce the need for out-of-home care placements. Where out-of-home care becomes necessary, seeking placements with relatives or kin can provide greater stability and relational connections.

NSW Department of Communities and Justice is currently overseeing a process of transferring case management of Aboriginal children and their carers to Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations (ACCOs).³³ As part of this process, NSW must prioritise investment in ACCOs to design and deliver culturally appropriate, kinship-based and community-led models of care.

5

Explore linking data in real time to enable real-time safeguarding children who go missing from care.

NSW has made progress in building comprehensive linked datasets, such as the NSW Human Services Dataset, but these are retrospective and not designed for real-time operational use. As a result, children reported as missing from out-of-home care may simultaneously engage with other systems – such as health, police or homelessness services – without those interactions being flagged across agencies. A child may appear in hospital emergency departments, youth accommodation services or police databases while still being recorded as missing in out-of-home care records.

A system that enables real-time data sharing across key services could transform how NSW responds to children who go missing from care. Establishing a secure, operational platform for real-time data exchange between the Department of Communities and Justice, Police, Department of Education, NSW Health, homelessness service providers and other key public services should be a priority.

To ensure comprehensive tracking, the system must include data from non-government organisations and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations that deliver out-of-home care and youth services. Data-sharing agreements and technical support would be essential.

NSW should consider piloting a real-time, cross-agency notification system that alerts child protection authorities when a child recorded as missing from care presents to police, hospitals or homelessness services. Such a system could be piloted in regions with high rates of children missing from care. This would allow for testing, iterative refinement, and evaluation of real-time tracking mechanisms before statewide rollout. Coordinated, multidisciplinary response teams should be activated when a child is away from placement. This could include caseworkers, police, health professionals and Aboriginal liaison officers as appropriate.

England's Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hubs provide an example of how police, child protection, health and education services can share information and coordinate responses for children experiencing vulnerability, including those at risk of exploitation or who go missing from home. However, these arrangements rely primarily on joint case coordination and referral processes rather than automated real-time data matching.³⁴

Conclusion

As NSW reforms its out-of-home care system, there is **an opportunity to embed targeted supports for a cohort that experiences a high degree of vulnerability**. Children who go missing from out-of-home care represent a high-risk and distinct subgroup requiring dedicated policy attention.

From a policy perspective, the findings presented in this paper support the need for trauma-informed, culturally safe and relationship-based care models; clear protocols for interagency collaboration, standardised reporting mechanisms and rapid response strategies; targeted efforts to reduce reliance on temporary and residential care placements; and better information sharing along with regular reviews of children in care to monitor their wellbeing.

The NSW Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study is currently conducting a follow-up study of young people after they leave care aged 18. This will provide a crucial understanding of the risk and protective factors associated with children's and young people's experiences in care. Qualitative research involving young people with lived experience of going missing from care is essential to provide insights into their motivations, challenges, and service needs. Enhanced data linkage efforts, including real-time integration of administrative datasets across agencies, would substantially improve the capacity to monitor and respond to missing incidents in a timely manner.

Greater attention must be paid to the experiences of Aboriginal children, who face disproportionate levels of entry into care and require community-led, culturally appropriate solutions.

Overall, these findings demonstrate the need for coordinated, evidence-informed and child-centred strategies to prevent missing episodes and strengthen cross-system responses to safeguard children in out-of-home care.





Endnotes

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