Reporting missing children to the police: A qualitative exploration of the factors associated with contacting or not contacting the police

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Abstract
Releasing missing person appeals is common practice when someone goes missing. Despite the wide-scale usage, the understanding on appeal effectiveness remains under-researched. This article aims to identify the factors that influence the likelihood of members of the public to report a child that has gone missing to the police and requires police assistance. Participant responses ($n = 252$) were qualitatively analysed identifying four factors that positively influenced the likelihood of contacting the police, and two factors that negatively influenced the likelihood of not contacting the police to report the child. Practical implications are also discussed.

Keywords
Missing children, police reporting, missing persons appeal, contacting police

A missing child represents a significant societal problem which raises concern for that child’s welfare (APPG, 2016; Lampinen et al., 2012a). In 2019/2020, over 325,000 incidents were reported which is equivalent to one report every 90 seconds (Missing People, 2018; NCA, 2021). Of these incidents, approximately 61% relate to missing children (NCA, 2021). In this situation, it is common practice for the police and the family and

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friends of the missing child to release missing person appeals through the media to request help from members of the public in finding the missing child (Lampinen et al., 2012b; Lampinen and Moore, 2016; Sweeney and Lampinen, 2012). However, despite the importance and wide-scale usage of missing person appeals, no previous research study has explored the decision-making processes of members of the general public to report children to the police following an observed missing child appeal and positive identification.

The media can be a vital resource for law enforcement as well as the family and friends of the missing child as the media has the potential to access further witnesses who may hold significant information concerning the missing child (Fyfe et al., 2015; Taylor et al., 2013). Likewise, individuals who do not hold any information on the missing child but interact with the media frequently may feel compelled to help by sharing the appeal with their own social media followers (Drivsholm et al., 2017). The number of individuals that the original missing child appeal could reach would, therefore, increase significantly in a short time frame compared to offline approaches such as door to door enquiries (Hunt et al., 2019). Whilst the wide usage and dissemination of publicity appeals ranges from newspaper notices to posters and websites to name a few (Drivsholm et al., 2017), researchers (e.g., Hunt et al., 2020; Juncu et al., 2020; Lampinen and Moore, 2016) have only recently begun exploring how effective these appeals are in being able to help locate a missing child.

Stages of appeal effectiveness

Lampinen et al. (2016) argue that whilst the ability to disseminate missing person appeals widely and quickly have a great deal of importance, there are a series of underlying stages which must be followed for a missing person appeal to be effective. First, appeals must be disseminated widely enough to progress to the second stage that requires members of the public to provide their full attention to the appeal (Lampinen et al., 2016). Third, the missing individual must then be encountered followed by, fourth, the ability to accurately attend to, and identify, the face of that missing individual (Lampinen et al., 2016). Fifth, the now-identified missing individual must trigger the public’s recollection of the missing persons appeal they observed previously before entering the final stage which is for that member of public to be confident enough to contact the police (Lampinen et al., 2016). Thus, according to Lampinen et al. (2016), only when all of these individual stages are accurately completed can the appeal be identified as being effective. Failure to progress from one stage to the next stage will result in the non-successful identification of the missing individual and therefore an ineffective missing persons appeal (Lampinen et al., 2016).

Following this model, researchers have only recently started to explore appeal effectiveness. For instance, Lampinen and Moore (2016) examined the attention and encountering stages by analysing data from 465 student participants who were randomly assigned to observe either three mock missing person videos across 3 days, or just one mock missing person video on the last day of a 3-day event. After observing the appeals, participants were informed that an individual from the missing person video appeal would be walking around the university campus and were asked to inform the researchers to report the individual if they encounter them (Lampinen and Moore, 2016). The
results demonstrated that the participants who had observed one missing person video appeal had greater correct identification sightings than the participants who had observed three missing person videos and therefore suggests that the overuse of appeal dissemination could decrease public engagement and thus, the appeal’s overall effectiveness (Lampinen and Moore, 2016).

In relation to the fourth and fifth stages of appeal effectiveness, researchers have identified that individuals are quite poor at identifying unfamiliar faces compared to familiar faces (Davis and Valentine, 2009; Megreya and Burton, 2006, 2008). For instance, Hunt et al. (2019) analysed the identification accuracy of 242 participants who were presented with either one, four, or eight fictional missing children photograph appeals. Following this observation, participants were presented with a 29-image sequential line-up task finding that the participants who had observed one fictional appeal had significantly greater identification accuracy and significantly lower identification error than participants who had observed four or eight missing children appeals (Hunt et al., 2019). Moreover, following a 3-day delay, participants repeated the line-up identification task that found the participants had significantly lower identification accuracy when observing four or eight photograph appeals compared to their original identification accuracy. Therefore, as the number of appeals increased in addition to the number of days passed since the appeal was last observed, the lower the effectiveness of the appeals.

**Reporting missing children to the police**

Whilst the majority of Lampinen et al.’s (2016) stages of appeals framework has been explored, the final stage relating to individuals taking action remains a gap in understanding how effective missing children appeals are. Although an individual may successfully attend to an appeal, encode the information accurately, identify and recognise the missing person, they must then be willing to act on this information by contacting the police (Lampinen et al., 2016). Despite the importance of reporting, no previous research study has explored the willingness of individuals to report missing children to the police that requires police assistance following an observed missing child appeal and positive identification. The research literature beyond missing persons currently focuses primarily on the willingness to contact the police if the individual is a victim of a crime directly (Miller et al., 2009). For example, Felson et al. (2002) sought to explore the underlying reasons of members of the public for reporting or not reporting the crimes they had experienced to the police via the National Crime Victimisation survey. The results identified that a primary reason for not contacting the police was due to the individual’s belief that the police may feel the information reported to them was irrelevant and that they would be wasting police time by reporting this (Felson et al., 2002).

Exploring social influences may further help to explore the underlying causes for the likelihood of contacting the police concerning missing children (Miller et al., 2009). For example, the perceived sense of danger associated with the event such as believing that an abducted child could be in grave danger is highly influential in the likelihood of whether someone will or will not contact the police (Miller et al., 2009). Studies have also shown how the decision for contacting the police can be influenced by the notion that someone else will likely report the child instead (Miller et al., 2009), the belief that contacting the
police is simply the right thing to do (Goudriaan et al., 2004; Miller et al., 2009), and experiencing personal empathetic concerns for the wellbeing of the missing child (Batson et al., 2007). The social phenomenon of the bystander effect may thus further aid our understanding of why individuals may or may not contact the police to report the missing child in need of police assistance. In essence, the bystander effect occurs when an individual is less likely to aid another individual when there is a physical or imagined presence of other people at the same event and has found strong support across numerous types of aid required (Fischer et al., 2011; Garcia et al., 2002; Greitemeyer and Mügge, 2013).

According to Greitemeyer and Mügge (2013), three primary psychological processes could help to explain why some individuals may not contact the police despite potentially locating a vulnerable missing child due to the bystander effect. First, audience inhibition would arise if the individual perceives that their helping behaviour would be considered in a negative light by others. Second, social influence derives from the observations of others’ behaviours to consider if help is actually required. Finally, diffusion of responsibility arises whereby the individual recognises that other individuals are present and believes that someone else will be better equipped to help. In this situation, these psychological processes could, therefore, reduce the likelihood of individuals contacting the police to report the child. To counteract this effect, Latane and Darley (1969) believe that individuals must first acknowledge their responsibility to help and feel confident in their ability to provide the form of help required.

**Purpose of the present study**

The research literature presented thus far highlights the gap in our current understanding of the factors which impact the likelihood of members of the general public contacting or not contacting the police to report a child that may require police assistance. There are a small number of studies that do explore the willingness of individuals in contacting the police but this is based upon the individuals being a victim of a crime themselves (Miller et al., 2009). Therefore, the present study sought to identify the factors that influence the decisions made by members of the public for contacting or not contacting the police to report a missing child to police who require police assistance.

**Method**

*Design*

The present study utilised a qualitative method design as part of a larger, quantitative study design (see Hunt et al., 2020 for details).

*Participants*

A total of 260 participants took part in the study using a convenience and snowball sampling method although eight participants were removed before data analysis due to partial completion. Therefore, the current study analysis comprises of a total of 252 participants (223 females; $M_{age} = 25.46$, $SD = 11.33$). Participants were recruited via the use of social media and an experimental recruitment system at the university. The study
was accessed through the Qualtrics software and therefore the participants were able to take part in the study at any time and in any location. Demographic background details of the sample are presented in Table 1.

### Materials

All participants had completed a single online experimental study as part of a larger research study. The present study explores the qualitative element for whether the participants believe that they would or would not contact the police to report a missing

| Demographic Variable              | N   | %    |
|-----------------------------------|-----|------|
| **Ethnicity**                     |     |      |
| White British                     | 171 | 67.86|
| White Other                       | 16  | 6.35 |
| Black                             | 8   | 3.17 |
| Asian                             | 39  | 15.48|
| Chinese, Japanese, or Southern    | 2   | 0.79 |
| Asian                             | 4   | 1.59 |
| Middle Eastern                    | 12  | 4.76 |
| **Highest Level of Education Completed** |     |      |
| Primary                           | 1   | 0.40 |
| Secondary                         | 8   | 3.17 |
| College/Sixth Form                | 171 | 67.86|
| Trade, Technical or Vocational    | 12  | 4.76 |
| Associate Degree                  | 6   | 2.38 |
| Bachelors Degree                  | 29  | 11.51|
| Masters Degree                    | 18  | 7.14 |
| Doctorate Degree                  | 4   | 1.59 |
| Other                             | 3   | 1.19 |
| **Current Employment Status**     |     |      |
| Full Time                         | 33  | 13.10|
| Part Time                         | 75  | 29.86|
| Unemployed                        | 5   | 1.98 |
| Retired                           | 4   | 1.59 |
| Student                           | 179 | 71.03|
| Unable                            | 4   | 1.59 |
| Other                             | 5   | 1.98 |
| **Marital Status**                |     |      |
| Single                            | 217 | 86.11|
| Married                           | 27  | 10.71|
| Divorced                          | 2   | 0.79 |
| Separated                         | 1   | 0.40 |
| Other                             | 5   | 1.98 |

Note. The cumulative percentages may be above 100% due to participants having the option to select more than one response for some background information questions.
child. Nonetheless, the full study materials are presented for clarity which was comprised of the following.

**Fictional descriptions.** The primary researcher created four fictional appeals (short argument appeal, short abduction appeal, long argument appeal, and long abduction appeal) based upon archival analysis of true missing children publicity appeals which had been published online via the social media accounts of numerous law enforcement, charity, public, and news journalist sources. All four fictional appeals presented to the participants focused on the same fictional missing person and comprised of the same information relating to the fictional child’s name and age, the clothing worn when last seen, eye colour, hair colour, date of the missing episode, and the estimated time that the child had gone missing.

In addition to these identical details, the two longer fictional appeals had additional information which included the missing child’s ethnicity, height, and details surrounding the reason behind the decision made by the child to go missing. The details provided to participants for the decision made to go missing for the long argument appeal includes information relating to the child heading towards a local bus stop which was two miles away from her home address and was the last location she was seen in before being reported as missing. The details provided to the participants for the decision made to go missing for the long abduction appeal however included information relating to the child entering an unknown male’s car, the colour of the car, and the clothing worn by the unknown male.

**Memory distraction task.** The memory distraction task comprised of a total of five individual five-row and two-column tables comprising of 10 randomised nouns that were generated using an online randomised word generator (www.randomlists.com/nouns). Each table was presented to the participants for 20 seconds. Thus, the memory distraction task comprised of a total of 50 randomised single noun words for a total of 100 seconds. All participants were asked to ‘try and remember as many of the words that will be displayed as possible as this may be tested later in the study’. Similar to previous studies (Gier et al., 2017; Sauerland and Sporer, 2007; Sweeney and Lampinen, 2012), the distraction task was developed to minimise the likelihood of the research participants rehearsing the details of the appeals in which they have just observed.

**Free recall task.** The free recall task presented participants with the following question which was to: ‘[...] recall as much information as possible that you can remember from the description of the missing child appeal that you had read at the start of the study’. The participants were presented with a single open-field text box whereby they could input their responses.

**Contacting the police.** Participants were presented with a dichotomous yes-no response option and were asked:

If the description presented to you was real and you believed that you may have recognised the missing child, would you believe that you would contact the police to confirm your sighting of the missing child?
Participants that indicated that they believe they would contact the police were then presented with a secondary question which asked: ‘why do you believe that you would call the police and what information would you provide?’ In contrast, participants who had indicated that they believe they would not contact the police were presented with an alternative secondary question which asked: ‘why do you believe that this is the case?’ The participants were able to respond to these questions qualitatively through an open-ended response.

**Demographic survey.** The demographic survey asked the participants to indicate their age, ethnicity, gender, current employment, the highest level of education completed, and their current marital status. All of the responses allowed the participants to select one of the pre-determined response options available, excluding age which was open-ended.

**Procedure**

The present study utilised the Qualtrics Inc. survey software (www.Qualtrics.com). Participants who had observed the recruitment appeal through social media or the university’s experimental participation system were requested to click on the weblink provided which directed them to a full information sheet and consent form of the present study. As part of the larger research study, participants were randomly assigned to one of the four available descriptive fictional appeal conditions. Participants were asked to simply observe the appeal and that they could spend as much or as little time as they required to observe the appeal. Following the observation, participants were presented with the short word memory task followed by the free recall task. Upon completion, participants were presented with the contacting the police task followed by the short demographic background survey which concluded the survey with a full debrief page that provided the full details on the research purpose and the researchers’ contact information.

**Analysis**

Participant responses were transcribed verbatim from the Qualtrics submissions by the primary researcher. Responses were analysed using thematic analysis which was considered to be the most appropriate method for the present study due to enabling an in-depth understanding into the phenomenon of the decisions behind why some individuals contact the police and others do not despite being presented with the same information of a missing child. Braun and Clarke’s (2006) approach were applied to the current study analysis to ensure validity.

First, participant responses were read through on three occasions to ensure accuracy in the initial analytic interests which were established during the initial read-through. These responses were then individually transcribed into Microsoft Word and then imported directly into NVivo Pro 11 to create a database of the extractions ready for the coding stage. Initial coding of the extracts differentiated participant responses into those who believed they would contact the police and those who believe they would not
contact the police. Following these groupings, the participant responses were then read individually in a line-by-line approach to generate a list of initial codes which reflected the data appropriately. Again, this coding approach was performed three times to ensure accuracy before the codes were analysed further to identify those which were thematically similar. Codes which shared identical reflections of the data were grouped to develop overarching themes of participant responses. These overarching themes identified from the analysis were then shared and discussed with the research team to further enhance the validity and quality of the analysis.

**Results**

Initial descriptive analysis of participant responses found that 193 participants (76.59\%) had indicated that they would have contacted the police to report the missing child with 59 participants (23.41\%) indicating that they would not have contacted the police. Subsequent qualitative analysis of participant responses identified four factors that increased the likelihood of contacting the police (importance of locating a missing child, personal feelings of guilt, strength of recall accuracy, and imagined similar situations) and two factors that decreased the likelihood of contacting the police (uncertainty of recall accuracy and wasting police time and resources).

**Factors positively influencing the likelihood of contacting the police**

*Importance of locating missing children.* One of the overarching factors identified that influenced the likelihood of participants contacting the police to report a missing child was due to the overall importance of locating the child with a total of 90 mentions. This theme encompasses factors associated with the perceived vulnerability of the child, the distress experienced by the family ‘left behind’, the participants’ willingness to help, and the belief that it is the right thing to do. Factors associated with the child’s young age and travelling alone or with the unknown male had generated a strong sense of fear for her wellbeing. For instance, participants stated that they would contact the police as ‘*she is young and therefore vulnerable*’ (Participant 120), ‘*she is a missing young girl who could potentially be in danger*’ (Participant 215), and ‘*...phoning the police could save the girl from any danger*’ (Participant 17). Other participants stated that it was important to not only remove the child from the potential risk of harm but that the child’s family will also be suffering. For example, participants indicated that: ‘*her relatives [are] in a lot of distress over her absence*’ (Participant 59), and ‘*her family are worried ... [and so] . . . it is important for her to be found*’ (Participant 77).

In addition, participants had also indicated that the reason behind their likelihood of contacting the police would increase is simply because they ‘*would want to help*’ (Participant 104) and that it ‘*is the right thing to do*’ (Participants 50, 100, 172, 175, 183, and 202). This altruistic nature arose regardless of whether the individual was confident or not in their recall accuracy of the child. For instance, participants indicated ‘*even if I am wrong it may still help*’ (Participant 137), and ‘*it is better to call the police and be wrong than to not call the police and the child remains in danger*’ (Participant 9). Likewise,
participants had indicated that they felt a sense of obligation to contact the police regardless and had stated that they would contact the police because they felt: ‘obliged to tell the police’ (Participant 138), that it is ‘simply my duty’ (Participant 153) and that ‘any possible sightings are important’ (Participant 69). Therefore, the overwhelming underlying factor that influenced the decision to contact the police to report a missing child was due to the belief that ‘society has a responsibility to protect the vulnerable’ (Participant 44).

**Strength of recall accuracy.** A second factor identified which was found to influence the likelihood of contacting the police was due to the overall strength in recall accuracy with a total of 19 mentions. For example, many of the participant statements suggested they were ‘highly certain that I have seen the girl’ (Participant 184), ‘can picture the girl quite clearly’ (Participant 103), and that they ‘believe that [their] knowledge would have been correct’ (Participant 140). Similarly, other participants believed their ability to accurately recall details of the child may not be high but they were still: ‘confident that the description would match the one that the police provided’ (Participant 26) and that they were ‘fairly confident in [their] recall of the identity of the young girl’ (Participant 89). However, the perceived ability to recall the details of the missing child accurately could also lead to an increase in misidentifications. Participants were unable to identify whether their recalled information of the missing child was correct or incorrect. Therefore, an individual who believes they are highly certain that their recalled information is accurate would be more likely to contact the police even if this information is incorrect. Nevertheless, many of the participants had stated that regardless of whether they were correct or incorrect, the information reported would allow the police to ‘do a follow up on [the] lead if they have no leads themselves’ (Participant 124).

**Personal feelings of guilt.** The third factor identified from participant responses that was found to influence the likelihood of contacting the police was due to personal feelings of guilt with a total of 15 mentions. Many of the participants believed that they would feel terrible if they think that they had located the missing child, did not contact the police to report the child, and then later discovered that the child had experienced some form of harm. For instance, participants had stated that ‘if she was found dead I would feel guilty for not raising my suspicion [to the police]’ (Participant 53), ‘[I] would feel an extreme amount of guilt if she wasn’t found or if anything had happened to her’ (Participant 30), and ‘if I didn’t contact the police I would always think ‘what if it was actually the child”? I wouldn’t be able to stop worrying’ (Participant 41).

Even if the missing child had not experienced any harm, participants stated that they would still feel a high level of personal guilt because the child could have been located and returned to her family much sooner. Participants had stated that ‘if I saw the missing child and didn’t report it ... I could be the reason why she was not found” (Participant 45), ‘if I hadn’t phoned the police and it was the missing child I had seen, that would be hard to live with’ (Participant 22), and ‘[I would] feel guilty if there was a chance for me to help the child get back to her family and I didn’t take it’ (Participant 133). Therefore, the overwhelming feeling that if ‘it [did] turn out to be her and I did nothing I would feel
terrible’ (Participant 117), appears to significantly increase the likelihood for contacting the police.

**Imagined similar situations.** Finally, a small number of participants suggested that one of the reasons which would influence them to contact the police was if they were in a similar situation with a total of 10 mentions. Participants who had considered the missing child in relation to someone in their own life that they know personally proved to be a strong influencer. For instance, participants stated they: ‘would hope that if [they] was missing or someone I know was missing that someone would contact the police with details’ (Participant 139), and ‘[I] would want someone to ring the police if they had seen someone I knew who was missing’ (participant 190).

In addition, participants who had young children of their own were also found to be highly motivated to contact the police to report the missing child with participants stating: ‘if my child was missing I’d expect someone else to do the same’ (Participant 28), ‘as a mother I would hope that if my child was missing any sightings however brief would be reported’ (Participant 101), and:

[I would contact the police] without pause as I have children and would hope that if they were missing and someone believed they had seen them that they would contact the police so I would know she was OK (Participant 54)

Finally, a single participant stated that they would contact the police due to experiencing a missing child directly. The participant’s younger sister had gone missing in the past and this was a very difficult and negative experience for them. This experience had strongly influenced the participant to contact the police regardless of whether their identification of the child is correct or incorrect. The participant stated that:

when I was younger my little sister went missing. Although it wasn’t for long, she was found within hours, it was the worst experience. The absolute worst. . . . [I would therefore] help out in any way for another missing child regardless of how little [information they have as anything] is better than nothing. (Participant 129)

Therefore, the thought of another individual who is known to them being missing was found to increase the likelihood of these individuals contacting the police to report the missing child. This increased likelihood occurs regardless of whether the individual believed they were correct or incorrect as they believed that another individual would do the same for them if they were in that situation.

**Factors negatively influencing the likelihood of not contacting the police**

**Uncertainty of recall accuracy.** One of the overarching factors identified that influenced the likelihood for not contacting the police to report a missing child was due to the high level of uncertainty with a total of 55 mentions. For example, many of the participants indicated that they: ‘wouldn’t be confident enough’ (Participants 3, 8, 46, 49, 80 and 81), and that ‘my uncertainty would stop me contacting them’ (Participant 136). Other
participants believed their lack of memory would strongly influence them to not contact the police as they: ‘cannot be 100% [certain] so I wouldn’t want to provide false information’ (Participant 85), and that they are ‘not certain enough that its them’ (Participant 71). In addition, participants also believed that the appearance of the missing child would also influence their likelihood of not contacting the police. Many of the participants had commented on the missing child’s clothing and appearance and stated that if this was a different person compared to the appeal, they would not feel confident in being able to recognise them. For instance, many of the participants state that the missing child is: ‘likely [to] look a bit different [to the appeal]’ (Participant 107), ‘if she was now wearing jeans ... and had a different hairstyle ... I would be more uncertain of whether it was her’ (Participant 11), and that there are ‘lots of young girls wearing scarfs, jeans and Nike trainers with blond hair’ (Participant 82).

The belief that the missing child shares generic characteristics with non-missing children further increased the participants’ fear of misidentification whereby they may inadvertently contact the police in relation to a missing child who is not actually missing. For instance, participants had mentioned that they: ‘wouldn’t be sure if it is the correct child’ (Participant 169), ‘would worry about mistaking the missing child to someone else’s daughter’ (Participant 112), and the ‘child I had seen could be any child’ (Participant 46). Therefore, participants believed that any potential change in the appearance of the missing child from within the appeal and their own level of confidence in their accuracy would likely reduce their likelihood to contact the police and therefore would fail to report the child to the police.

**Wasting police time and resources.** The final factor that was found to increase the likelihood of participants from not contacting the police was due to the belief that contacting the police would waste time and resources with a total of 14 mentions. Some of the participants believed that if they had reported an incorrect child to the police and the police follow up on this lead, this would inadvertently waste the police’s time. For instance, participants stated they would: ‘not want to report false information’ (Participant 55) and would be ‘wasting police time’ (Participants 3, 11, 46, 49, 55, 82, and 119). A small number of participants had also discussed their worry that: ‘the police wouldn’t believe me ... [and therefore] ... I would be wasting police time if I had gotten it wrong’ (Participant 3). Participants had also discussed factors associated with the belief that they would be wasting police time if they reported a missing child who was missing but has now been located. The participants mentioned that they would waste police time as: ‘she might have already been found’ (Participant 128), it could ‘make the case harder for the police to find the missing child’ (Participant 228), and they would ‘feel silly if the child is not in fact missing’ ( Participant 232).

**Discussion**

The current study presents a novel exploration of the factors that increase or decrease the likelihood of contacting the police to report a missing child. The study identified four main factors that had influenced the public’s decision to contact the police which relates to the importance of locating the child, the strength of recall accuracy, personal feelings
of guilt, and being in an imagined similar situation. The study also identified two factors that decreased the likelihood for contacting the police which related to the uncertainty in recall accuracy and the belief that reporting the child could lead to the waste of vital police time and resources.

**Contacting the police**

The current study identified four factors that influenced the likelihood for members of the public to report a missing child to the police. The first factor identified relates to the importance of locating the child which supports Miller et al.’s (2009) review that argued members of the public may be more willing to contact the police when they believe that the child is in danger. Moreover, some of the participants stated that the belief that contacting the police is simply the right thing to do as a member of society which further supports the findings by Goudriaan et al. (2004) who found that the primary reason behind individuals contacting the police to report a crime in general, was simply due to the belief that it should be reported. Therefore, increasing the public’s understanding and emphasising the dangers associated with missing children, this could see an increase in the number of individuals who report a missing child to the police.

The second factor identified that influenced participants to contact the police was due to the overall confidence in recall accuracy. This finding presents a novel insight behind reporting missing children with near non-existent reporting behaviours that have previously been explored (Miller et al., 2009). This novel insight is of significant importance to explore further as to why some individuals contact the police and other individuals may not. Higher levels of personal confidence in own accuracy of knowledge to the event may therefore significantly increase the likelihood of that individual contacting the police. In addition, the third factor identified was due to the development of guilt although again currently lacks research understanding. This finding suggests that increasing the levels of actual or perceived feelings of guilt experienced by individuals for not contacting the police could increase the likelihood of those individuals to reporting the missing child. However, additional exploration is required to further explore how feelings of guilt may impact subsequent behaviour for contacting the police to report a child in need of police assistance.

Finally, the study also identified a small number of individuals who had indicated that they would contact the police to report the missing child due to the individual’s considering what would happen if they, or somebody else that they knew, were in that same situation. This finding somewhat supports the work by Lampinen et al. (2009) who surveyed supermarket customers on how important they believe locating a missing child was. The results identified that the participants who had younger children of their own were significantly more likely to believe that locating a missing child is of extreme importance compared to participants who did not have any younger children (Lampinen et al., 2009). However, it is important to note that this finding may be circumstantial as the researchers did not identify the likelihood of contacting the police or engaging in searching for the missing.
Not contacting the police

In contrast to the factors increasing the likelihood of contacting the police, the current study also identified two factors which reduced the likelihood of contacting the police to report a missing child. The first factor identified relates to the overall uncertainty in recall accuracy with individuals who believe they are not 100% certain on their accuracy of the missing child will not contact the police. This finding presents a novel insight as the literature surrounding the underlying motives for contacting the police to report missing children is non-existent (Miller et al., 2009). The majority of the literature surrounding the exploration of contacting the police derives from understanding victims of crime reporting crimes to the police, and not from a third individual. It could be assumed that if individuals who have a high level of confidence in their own recall accuracy would contact the police (Goudriaan et al., 2004; Miller et al., 2009), then individuals who have a low level of confidence in their recall accuracy would be less likely to contact the police. However, additional research is required to further expand our understanding of why individuals would not contact the police to report a child needing assistance and how we can minimise this to improve the levels of reporting.

The final factor identified for not contacting the police was due to the belief that reporting the child could be wasting the police’s time and limited resources. This finding supports the work by Felson et al. (2002) who analysed the National Crime Victimisation Survey and found that one of the primary reasons held by members of the public for not contacting the police was due to the belief that they may be wasting police time. The participants in this study also believed that the police may feel the information reported to them was irrelevant (Felson et al., 2002). Although this finding is related to the reporting of crime and is not related to reporting missing children, it demonstrates how the ill-placed perceptions which may be held by some members of the public could hinder the likelihood of reporting potentially vital information to the police. Therefore, by correcting and improving these misperceptions, it may help to increase the likelihood of those individuals reporting any information to the police that could provide an extremely important lead to follow up on during the missing child’s investigation.

Implications

The current study findings may contribute to changes in policy and practice relating to the usage of missing children publicity appeals. For example, the College of Policing’s Authorised Professional Practice guidance relating to appeals could be updated to emphasise that all reports provided by members of the public can be vital and would not be wasting time and resources which the study found increased the likelihood of individuals not contacting the police. Additional statements or details provided on missing children publicity appeals could be improved as a standardised practice to continue improving the effectiveness of the appeals and improving the likelihood that individuals who may have information on a missing child will report these to the police.

Moreover, the findings of the study may also help to increase public understanding and awareness of the importance of reporting missing children to the police. The increased understanding could positively influence the likelihood of members of the
public reporting missing children to the police as they will become aware of the importance of locating missing children and returning them quickly to minimise the potential risks of harm that may arise. This increased understanding of missing children behaviours may also help to improve neighbourhood relations as reporting behaviours can be improved via the use of neighbourhood policing teams in areas whereby children are at more risk of going missing. Increased community relations with the local policing teams may further increase the likelihood that these individuals will report any child who is potentially missing to the police and so a greater awareness of the risks of harm present when children go missing, and a greater community relationship with local policing teams may help to improve overall reporting behaviours.

Limitations and future directions
The current study illustrates some of the key factors that influence the likelihood of individuals contacting or not contacting the police to report a missing child. However, as this study was part of an additional and wider research project, the information which was provided by the participants was minimal. Many of the participants had provided just a few words for their reasons behind their decision on whether they would or would not contact the police and therefore, future research should explore these factors as a stand-alone research study using semi-structured interviews. This approach would allow the researchers to delve much deeper into the underlying factors behind why some individuals would, and other individuals would not, contact the police despite observing the same missing child.

Similarly, the participants’ responses on whether they would or would not contact the police derived from the fictional appeal they had observed. Each of these appeals illustrated a reason for why the child may have gone missing which may have subsequently influenced the likelihood for that participant in contacting or not contacting the police due to their perceived understanding of the lifestyle or behaviour of the missing child. Research is yet to explore the impact that the behaviour and lifestyle of the missing child may have on the perceptions held by members of the public of the child’s vulnerability and reasoning behind the child going missing, and whether this would influence the likelihood of contacting the police. However, participants in the study had observed one of four different fictional descriptions and so whilst the influence of the perceived behaviour and lifestyle of the missing child may have partly influenced the participants’ decisions, there was appropriate variation in the descriptions across all the participants to minimise this influence in the current study. Future research should explore whether the perception of the missing child held by members of the public influences their subsequent likelihood for contacting or not contacting the police to report the missing child.

Conclusion
There remains a substantial underreporting of missing persons to the police (Shalev Greene et al., 2019). The current study presents a novel insight into some of the underlying factors that influence the likelihood of whether an individual would or would not contact the police to report a missing child in need of police assistance. The findings of
the study suggest that increasing the understanding of the importance of locating a missing child and improving the level of confidence in memory recall of the details of the missing child, could improve the likelihood of individuals reporting missing children to the police. Likewise, the development of future feelings of guilt if an individual did not report the child, and framing the appeals in a manner to reflect an imagined similar situation with people that members of the public know personally, could also help to improve the likelihood of individuals contacting the police.

The current study also found that high levels of uncertainty in memory recall of the details of the missing child, and the belief that contacting the police would be wasting their time and resources, were found to increase the likelihood of individuals not reporting a missing child to the police. Therefore, by emphasising the importance of contacting the police and reassuring the public that all information is important whether this leads to a correct or incorrect sighting could further reduce the rate of underreporting. However, as this study presents a first insight into the underlying factors associated with the likelihood of contacting or not contacting the police to report a missing child, there is a great need for additional research to explore these influences further to improve the effectiveness of missing children appeals. Therefore, when a child goes missing, any future appeals presented to the public could provide the greatest possible chance of at least one member of the public being able to accurately identify and report the child to the police leading to a quick and safe return of the missing child.

Availability of data and material
The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to containing information that could compromise the privacy of research participants.

Declaration of conflicting interests
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