

BCPPS 5.1 Missing Person Investigations

The purpose of the BC Provincial Policing Standards for Missing Person Investigations is to establish the overall approach to be taken in missing person investigations in British Columbia. The intent is to ensure that all missing person investigations are prioritized and undertaken at a high standard appropriate to identified risks.

These Standards were developed in response to recommendations made by Commissioner Wally Oppal following the Missing Women Commission of Inquiry. While many police forces have already begun to implement changes consistent with these recommendations, these Standards will ensure a consistent approach is maintained throughout the province and safeguard the important lessons of the Pickton cases and other missing and murdered women investigations.

The underlying principles of the Standards are that:

- **There should be no barriers to reporting a missing person and investigations should begin without delay.**

A report must be accepted, the missing person entered on police information systems and an investigation commenced promptly regardless of the characteristics of the missing person, the length of time the person has been missing, the relationship between the reportee and the missing person, or jurisdiction.

It is the responsibility of the police force to which the report is made to accept the report.

The standards set out the criteria and process for determining jurisdiction; however, the start of an investigation should not be delayed by jurisdictional concerns. If jurisdiction later transfers, information obtained by the police force that initiated the investigation must be promptly transferred to the police force of jurisdiction.

- **Investigations into persons reported missing should initially be approached as high risk until a risk assessment is completed.**

Missing person investigations are a high risk area of policing. A swift initial response may be critical to the missing person's wellbeing and/or the success of the investigation. It is easier to scale back the initial response than to recover lost early investigative opportunities.

A police officer must conduct a risk assessment without delay and, in consultation with a supervisor, determine the resources to be applied, the urgency with which to apply them, and possible lines of enquiry.

- **Aboriginal women and girls are at an increased risk of harm.**

Risk is influenced by the unique circumstances surrounding a missing person's disappearance. However, risk may also flow from the profile of the missing person, in particular their inclusion in groups that are at an increased risk of harm, such as Aboriginal women and girls. Research has established that Aboriginal women and girls are disproportionately represented among missing and murdered women throughout Canada. This must be considered when determining the appropriate response and resources.

- **If foul play is suspected, the case must be assigned to a serious or major crime section.**

Officers assigned to an investigation should have the skills and capacity appropriate to the circumstances of the case. Risk must be re-assessed throughout the investigation.

- **The safety and wellbeing of the missing person should be the primary concern driving investigative tasks and decisions.**

Finding the missing person safe and well is the paramount objective.

Requests for assistance within or between police forces must be carried out promptly by all involved. Forms and documentation are meant to guide and assist an investigation, ensure follow-up and accountability, and support subsequent investigation by another investigator where needed. The pursuit of investigative leads, however, is the first priority.

- **Police officers need discretion to address the unique needs of each case, with accountability for decisions through supervisory review.**

Provincial standards establish the overall approach to be taken to missing person investigations in British Columbia. The police force's policies and procedures provide more specific direction consistent with local needs and structure.

Templates and checklists required by the standards guide decision-making and ensure that investigative avenues are considered, but they do not eliminate officer discretion.

Senior officers and supervisors are responsible to ensure that investigations are given the right level of priority and resources, and are thoroughly investigated. This includes day-to-day supervision by immediate supervisors throughout an investigation as well as documented reviews at key milestones. The decisions and actions of both investigators and supervisors must be documented in the case file and appropriately reviewed for quality assurance purposes.

- **Cooperation between police forces is crucial to missing person investigations.**

People can move easily across jurisdictional boundaries; communication and collaboration between policing jurisdictions can be critical in these situations.

Cooperation can include ensuring that case information is promptly entered onto police information systems and that entries are kept up to date, providing a swift and fulsome

response to requests for assistance, and accepting transfers of jurisdiction without delay where the circumstances of the case dictate. This is closely related to the principle that finding the missing person safe and well is to be the primary concern driving tasks and decisions. Consistency in practices and terminology also facilitates cooperation between police forces.

A designated missing person coordinator at the police force, detachment or district level provides an additional resource to support open communication and cooperation on cases crossing jurisdictional boundaries.

- **Families and reportees must be kept appropriately informed of the progress of an investigation, and treated with compassion and respect.**

A missing person event is stressful and family members and reportees must be appropriately informed of supports available to them. Family members and reportees are potential resources to aid in an investigation and open lines of communication should be maintained. Family members and reportees should always know who to contact if they have questions about or information relevant to the investigation and should be informed of key developments in the investigation in an appropriate manner, and wherever possible, prior to any public announcements.

A plan for ongoing communication in long term cases should be established in consultation with the family/reportee.

- **A proactive approach should be taken towards missing person investigations.**

Action should be taken to identify and address recurring reports involving the same locations, missing person profiles, or individuals. Where problems or patterns are observed, the police force should liaise with outside agencies such as local health or child protection authorities to discuss solutions or mitigating strategies.

When a missing young person is located, an attempt should be made to determine whether they suffered any harm or exploitation, and identify interventions that might help ensure their safety and prevent future occurrences.

A problem-solving approach can help to resolve underlying issues and ultimately reduce the volume of avoidable reports and/or ensure that the reporting process and ensuing investigations run more smoothly.

- **Going missing is not in and of itself a crime.**

People go missing for many reasons. A right to privacy must be balanced with police responsibility to ensure the safety and wellbeing of a missing person.

Police must scrutinize what information is conveyed to the public about a missing person, what information is shared with concerned persons, and what information is retained in police files.