

Understanding the Experiences & Needs of LGBTIQ+ Children Going Missing or Living Away from Home



Authors & Reviewers

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Behind the project

The **'Young, Queer & Away from Home'** project is implemented by Missing Children Europe (BE) in cooperation with IGLYO (BE) and the University of Portsmouth (UK).

[Missing Children Europe](#) represents 32 Non-Governmental Organisations active in 27 countries across Europe for the prevention, protection and support of missing and sexually exploited children and their families. They provide the link between research, policies, and organisations on the ground to protect children from any form of violence, abuse, or neglect that is caused by or results from them going missing. They also coordinate the network of 116000 hotlines for missing children, and the network of cross border

family mediators and facilitates coordination of cases that involve cross-border issues.

[IGLYO – The International LGBTQI Youth & Student Organisation](#) is the world's largest network dedicated to LGBTQI young people and their rights. We represent the voice of over 115 Member Organisations in over 40 countries across the Council of Europe Region. IGLYO advances the rights of LGBTQI young people, fights for equality and inclusion, and empowers LGBTQI youth voices through international training and events, thematic research and advocacy campaigns, online tools and resources, networking activities, and much more.

[The University of Portsmouth](#) hosts The Centre for the Study of Missing Persons, provides a clear focus for research into missing persons, for knowledge transfer and for educational provision, to academics, to professionals in the missing persons community and to relatives of missing people.

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“It was an escalation of deep emotional and psychological struggle I was facing ever since I remember due to being disabled, queer and trans. Therefore, I was repeatedly told, [I was] not the child my parents wanted.”

— Young LGBTIQ+ Person

I think that resources to support marginalised young people are shrinking, at a time that need for safety is rising. Agencies are increasingly ignoring discrimination against young LGBTQIA+ young people.

— Practitioner



Glossary of Terms

Children - Anyone who is 0 to 17-years old (UNCRC, [2016](#)).

Home - A place of residence which can be a family home, residential care home, foster care, semi-independent living, supported accommodation, etc. In this report, “home” is used as a descriptive term and does not imply that the setting is safe or affirming.

LGBTIQ+ (rather than LGBT, LGBTI or LGBTQ+) - An umbrella term used in this report to refer to people with diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions, and/or variations in sex characteristics. It can include, but is not limited to, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex, queer, questioning, asexual and non-binary people. We use “LGBTIQ+” for readability and alignment with EU policy language, while recognising that people use different terminology in different contexts and that we prioritise participants’ self-descriptions where available.

SOGIESC - A human-rights and safeguarding term referring to Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression, and Sex Characteristics. It is used to explicitly include intersex people and to avoid assumptions that one acronym captures all identities and experiences.

Bisexual/Bi+ - An umbrella term for people whose sexual, romantic and/or emotional attraction and/or behaviour (and/or orientation) is focused on people of more than one gender, whether or not they personally identify as bisexual.

Trans / Trans and gender-diverse - An umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or expression differs from the sex they were assigned at birth. This includes transgender women, transgender men, and many non-binary and gender-diverse people. We prioritise self-identification and recognise that terminology varies across contexts.

Cisgender - “A term that refers to a person who does not identify as trans” (ILGA-Europe, [online](#)).

Non-binary - A gender identity that is not exclusively “woman” or “man”. Non-binary people may identify as both, neither, or somewhere along a spectrum, and may or may not identify as trans.

Intersex - “Intersex individuals are born with sex characteristics (sexual anatomy, reproductive organs, hormonal structure and/or levels and/or chromosomal patterns) that do not fit the typical definition of male or female. The term “intersex” is an umbrella term for the spectrum of variations of sex characteristics that naturally occur within the human species.



The term intersex acknowledges the fact that physically, sex is a spectrum and that people with variations of sex characteristics other than male or female exist” (ILGA-Europe, [online](#)).

Endosexism - Norms and structures that privilege non-intersex bodies and pathologise or erase intersex variations.

Heteronormativity - Social norms that assume heterosexuality as the default and organise institutions and expectations accordingly.

Cisnormativity - Social norms that assume all people are cisgender (not trans) and that gender is fixed and binary, shaping policies and service responses.

Missing child - “Anyone aged under 18, for whom no information can be found on their whereabouts” (European Commission, [2013](#)). Operational definitions and recording practices vary across jurisdictions (e.g., “missing from home” and “missing from care”), and not all missing episodes are reported or recorded in comparable ways.

Missing - In the context of this project, “missing” includes situations where a child or young person’s parents or guardians did not know their whereabouts for a period of time, whether or not the episode was reported to authorities. It also includes situations where parents or guardians knew, or were partially aware of, the child’s whereabouts, but where the child was nonetheless living away from home or a care setting. This may occur for a range of reasons, including leaving home or a care setting to protect safety or wellbeing, being told/lured/coerced/threatened to leave (including exploitation), or leaving to spend time with peers or other relatives, or seek community/support. Importantly, the definition itself does not assume why a child left; the findings about forced or survival-driven leaving reflect participants’ reported circumstances, not a preset element of the definition.

Away from home - A broader descriptive term used to reflect that some young people do not identify with the label “missing”, including experiences such as forced displacement, couch surfing, informal living arrangements, or homelessness.

Outing - The disclosure of a person’s sexual orientation, gender identity/expression, or sex characteristics without their consent. In safeguarding contexts, outing can increase the risk of harm.

Young people - Anyone who is 18 to 29 years old (Eurostat, [n.d](#)). *Where relevant population statistics use a different youth age band (e.g., 15–29), this is specified for transparency and comparability.*

Acknowledgements

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Participants

This study would not have been possible without the young people and practitioners who participated in the surveys and interviews. We are especially grateful to the **36 young people** who shared personal experiences connected to leaving home, being away from home and navigating support systems, and to the **32 practitioners** who contributed their time and professional insight. Their perspectives and reflections are the foundation of this report and of the recommendations it advances.

Youth and expert boards

We warmly thank the project's two advisory boards; the **youth board** for shaping the study through their guidance on language, accessibility, safety and relevance; and the **expert/practitioner advisory board** for their input on framing, recruitment, safeguarding considerations, interpretation of findings and the

development of training and policy recommendations.

Authors

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Reviewers

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Partner networks and dissemination

We are grateful to the wider networks of Missing Children Europe and IGLYO, including member organisations and national partners, for supporting outreach and dissemination. Their support helped ensure the study reached young people and professionals across multiple countries and contexts.

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Executive Summary

This project examines the experiences and support needs of LGBTIQ+ young people who went missing as children (under 18), alongside the perspectives of practitioners who work with them across the EU and the UK. The study is grounded in an understanding that going missing is often defined from the point of view of parents, guardians, institutions or reporting systems, while the missing person themselves, as they may not identify with the label, particularly if they know their whereabouts. The exception to that is when they have been abducted or murdered, when they are lost or there is a severe mental illness involved.

How this report uses the term 'missing'

In this project, “missing” includes situations where a child or young person’s parents or guardians did not know their whereabouts for a period of time, whether or not the episode was reported to authorities. It also includes situations where parents or guardians knew, or were partially aware of, the child’s whereabouts, but where the child was nonetheless living away from home or a care setting. This may occur for a range of reasons, including leaving home or a care setting to protect safety or wellbeing, being told/lured/coerced/threatened to leave (including exploitation), or leaving to spend time with peers or other relatives, or seek community/support. Importantly, the definition itself does not assume why a child left; the findings about forced or survival-driven leaving reflect participants’ reported circumstances, not a preset element of the definition.

Aims

This exploratory EU-UK study aims to

- (1) identify the factors that lead LGBTIQ+ children to go missing;
- (2) examine their experiences whilst missing;
- (3) understand their support needs; and
- (4) explore their contact with support services.

The expected outcome is to translate the findings into training, awareness-raising activities and evidence-informed policy recommendations that will strengthen prevention, safeguarding, and return/aftercare LGBTIQ+ children.



Evidence gap and rationale

Currently, there is a lack of research on the relationship between children and young people identifying as LGBTIQ+ and going missing across the EU. Almost all the research on this subject is from the US. Findings show that approximately 20% of children leave home because their family members, legal guardians, or staff at care institutions disapprove of or are uncomfortable with their sexual orientation or gender identity. This disapproval transcends mere private attitudes and becomes a mechanism of social regulation, shaping how families and institutions police gender and sexuality. As a result, a disproportionate number of LGBTIQ+ children experience homelessness or are placed in the care system with long term impact on their physical and mental health, education, etc.

There is early evidence to suggest LGBTIQ+ children are at risk of having to live away from home (e.g. family home, care home, etc) in the EU. Despite the large number of children concerned, the risk of harm and the potential long-term effects on their well-being and opportunities, there is no robust data from Europe on this issue.

Methodology and datasets

The study used a two-phased design to improve feasibility and accessibility. A pilot study (to test language, recruitment routes and the appropriateness of questions in a sensitive topic area), followed by a main study with refined terminology and instruments.

Across the EU and the UK, the project collected data from 68 participants through four datasets. The total number of young people was 36 and practitioners 32:

1. Pilot survey of young people (n=8)
2. Main young people survey (n=28) **(total young people: n=36)**
3. Practitioners survey (n=29)
4. Practitioners' interviews (n=3)

The study is exploratory and the sample is self-selecting. Therefore, the findings are indicative and should not be read as prevalence estimates.

Key findings

Who participated

Young people (n=36) were aged 18–29 and lived in 15 EU countries plus the UK at the time of participation. They reported diverse sexual orientations and gender identities and sex characteristics.

A notable feature of the sample is that most young participants identified as trans or gender-diverse (64%, n=23). This is significant for interpretation, as transphobia and trans erasure can shape both pathways out of home and experiences of services. This can range from overt hostility to institutional harms such as misgendering, unsafe placement decisions and denial of identity,

It is also notable that over half of respondents can be considered bi+ (51%, 18/35). This matters because bi+ people commonly face bi-erasure and biphobia, which can affect disclosure, well-being and help-seeking, and should be reflected in training and policy recommendations.

Many young participants also identified with additional marginalised groups (multiple selections), particularly neurodivergence (n=20) and disability (n=19), highlighting the relevance of intersectional approaches.

Practitioners (n=32) were predominantly aged 26–45, based across 13 EU countries plus the UK, and worked in a range of settings (including civil society organisations, social services, health services, homelessness services and missing-persons related organisations). A high proportion identified as LGBTIQ+ (81% n=26) and/or neurodivergent (24% n=7).

Going missing/Leaving home

Leaving home was often a survival strategy or a forced eviction rather than a voluntary step towards independence. It was also a refusal to stay complicit in spaces that deny their identity. Reported drivers included:

- Identity-based rejection (including rejection of gender identity and/or sexual orientation)
- Violence and abuse within the home or care setting
- Religious/cultural pressures
- Mental health strain linked to unsafe environments
- Disability-related exclusion

- Exploitation and grooming

A substantial proportion (50% n=14) of young people stated that their family or legal guardian was sometimes unaware of their whereabouts, whereas 21% (n=6) stated their parents or legal guardians were not aware of their whereabouts. This fits with the definition of a missing child. If they were reported missing, it was likely to be to law enforcement or social services. 42% (n=15) of young people went missing/left home when they were 16-17 years old, but 4 participants were younger than 10 years old.

There was a clear tendency to go missing/leave home repeatedly. 57% (n=20) of young people left home twice or more, with 17% (n=6) of young people leaving home 10 or more times. Young people also left home for longer periods of time than the general population of children who go missing across the EU and the UK. This is important, as for many LGBTIQ+ children, this was their way of navigating hostile environments.

Being missing/Living away from home

This study did not ask young people to provide detailed accounts of what occurred while away from home, to avoid potentially triggering questions in a survey context without direct support. As a result, reported “risk types” rely primarily on practitioner perceptions, which may reflect what is most visible to services (often crisis cases) and may underrepresent less visible experiences or those who avoid institutions due to fear, stigma, or past discrimination. The most frequently identified risks were:

- Mental health issues (86% n=25)
- Sexual exploitation or drug/alcohol use (83% n=24)
- Homelessness (69% n=20)
- Being a victim of physical violence (69% n=20)

Support needs and service access

Young people emphasised immediate needs for safety and shelter, financial support, mental health support, legal advice, connecting with their peers, family acceptance, and identity validation.

Returning home was often not a safe or desired outcome. 77% (n=28) of these young people never returned to their home with 29% (n=8) of young people stating they never reestablished contact with their family.

Support needs frequently extended into medium and long-term pathways and included housing stability, education continuity, work, income support, sustained mental health care



Support was offered in a variety of ways including accommodation, psychological support, practical support, financial support, legal advice, hotlines/helplines.

Experiences with services were mixed:

- When support was affirming and responsive, young people described it as a life line or even life-saving.
- When needs were not met, or when services were experienced as discriminatory or unsafe, contact could be retraumatising and lead to further isolation.
- Dissatisfaction and reported discrimination were especially prominent in relation to law enforcement and social services, while experiences with shelters and civil society organisations were more mixed.
- Barriers identified by practitioners included restrictive legal frameworks, parental consent requirements, inconsistent protocols, stigma, limited resources, and uneven training provision.

Recommendations

To ensure long-term stability, protections for LGBTIQ+ children and youth should be structurally embedded across legal, regulatory, fiscal, and programmatic frameworks at both EU and national levels. Policies rooted in multiple domains are significantly more resistant to political shifts and administrative reversals.

Recommendations are therefore presented across three complementary levels: EU-level policy and coordination, national government child protection and safeguarding systems, and frontline service practice.

Policy recommendations for the European Union:

- Mainstream LGBTIQ+ vulnerabilities and needs in all relevant EU policies and legislations, in particular in relation to children's rights but also LGBTQ+ Equality Strategy, Anti-Poverty Strategy, and Civil Society Strategy.
- Ensure safe, meaningful and inclusive child and youth participation in the design, implementation and monitoring of EU policies related to LGBTIQ+ groups.
- Improve EU data collection on LGBTIQ+ children and youth to address under-reporting, assess where gaps and patterns are, and plan adequate support responses. Improving the collection of data should include adopting standards for recording SOGIESC-related indicators across the EU.

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- Ensure any EU guidance on SOGIESC data collection is safe-by-design (lawful basis, minimisation, consent/assent where appropriate, strong confidentiality safeguards, and clear protections against outing), recognising that in some contexts collecting SOGIESC data may increase risk if safeguards are weak.
 - Including funding in diverse EU streams (ESF+, CERV, etc) for improved capacity building, awareness raising, research, and advocacy of LGBTIQ+ support and protection.

Policy recommendations for national governments:

- Ensure inclusive, accessible, and visible support services for LGBTIQ+ children and youth.
- Provide training to professionals offering support to LGBTIQ+ children and young people. This should include professionals who are not LGBTIQ+ focused but who come into contact with this group and who work in law enforcement, social services, the justice system, civil society organizations, healthcare and education. Training should focus on improved knowledge of SOGIESC and should form part of basic child protection training for professionals.
- An intersectional approach should be embedded in all training to ensure careful consideration is given to the intersection with other minority groups. For example, LGBTIQ+ children in migration, LGBTIQ+ children who are in the care system, and LGBTIQ+ children who are also neurodivergent. Services should have the ability to address the distinct vulnerabilities and compounded needs which arise from intersectionality. Examples include improved understanding on the co-trajectories of marginalization and violence for different groups, knowledge on tailored support referrals in local areas, and skills such as the adoption of different communication styles for children.
- Ensure all services embed restorative and trauma-informed practices to reduce the risk of re-traumatization and secondary victimization of LGBTIQ+ children and young people, in particular when they come into contact with police and the justice system.
- Services who come into contact with LGBTIQ+ children and youth should adopt an official point of contact with specialized knowledge and skills to adequately support this group, and to cater for the distinct needs which may arise when different groups intersect.
- Strengthen responses and prevention mechanisms for LGBTIQ+ children and youth who (are at risk of) going missing. This should include:

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- Clear roles and protocols within and across different agencies on what to do before, during and after a disappearance. This will also lead to improved multi-agency working (see recommendation below).
 - Create reporting routes for children and youth which can be used without parental consent, including routes that allow young people to seek help without automatic disclosure to parents/guardians where this would increase risk, consistent with safeguarding and national legal frameworks.
 - Enhance cooperation and coordination through improved multi-agency work. This should include the different agencies and sectors who come into contact with LGBTIQ+ children and youth (i.e. police, social workers, child hotlines and helpline operators, staff in CSOs, care homes, shelters and education, judicial workers, etc). Ways forward are:
 - Establishing country-level LGBTIQ+ youth safety hubs as single and visible points of entry.
 - Requiring shared protocols and/or data-sharing agreements between services.
 - Improve the visibility of existing services for LGBTIQ+ children and youth looking for support. This should count for services that are LGBTIQ+ focused and for services working with all children.
 - Sustainable and adequate funding is necessary to improve the awareness raising, outreach and capacity building of services. Requirements and recommendations to achieve this on a long-term and stable level include:
 - Protecting funding sources from political swings and de-prioritization.
 - Ending reliance on ad-hoc or self-funded upskilling of staff.
 - Providing targeted funding to CSOs programs.
 - Offering funding for queer and trans-led initiatives (ie. mutual aid, peer support, youth collectives are all safe, trusted and fast services which should be funded).
 - For LGBTIQ+ children and youth who are (at risk of becoming) homeless, prioritize safe and immediate accommodation. This should include mandating LGBTIQ+ inclusive emergency beds for under 18 year olds in every local area with:
 - a minimum service standard offering placement within 24 hours
 - no forced returns to home or care institutions
 - capped temporary stays for stability

- and offering pathways to medium and long-term stable housing,
- with clear trans-inclusive placement policies and staff training to prevent misgendering, harassment, and unsafe accommodation decisions.

Recommendations for practice:

- Improve consistency of service delivery within countries and across the EU and the UK. This includes recording relevant factors, including SOGIESC- related drives, that lead children to go missing so that these causes, frequently rendered invisible, are addressed. This should be done in ways that minimise risk of outing and do not require young people to disclose identities they do not wish to share.
- Conduct a future mapping of good practices in service delivery to help other countries learn and improve.
- Prioritise accommodation and safety as a response to immediate needs of young LGBTIQ+ children and young people. While most services offer psychological support, there is an urgent need to offer accommodation and shelter, which are not always available.
- Develop more medium and long-term support options for LGBTIQ+ children and young people, such as more permanent accommodation solutions, educational and professional plans, etc.
- Prioritise training of staff on specific support needs of LGBTIQ+ children and young people, particularly in law enforcement and social services. Such training should be substantive and practice-based, incorporating real-life case studies, scenario-based exercises addressing unconscious bias, and trauma-informed approaches to safeguarding that avoid pathologising sexual orientation or gender identity..
- Designate trained staff members within agencies that are not LGBTIQ+ focused to support this minority group. Having an official point of contact within these services with a specialised personnel will lead to more understanding of the specific needs of young LGBTIQ+ people and reduce discrimination and trauma.
- Consider more carefully the intersection between being trans and belonging to other minority groups, such as neurodivergent communities. There is evidence that neurodivergent individuals, particularly those diagnosed with autism, are significantly more likely to identify as LGBTIQ+ than those who are neurotypical (The Brain Charity, [2025](#)). Training should therefore address the compounded needs and vulnerabilities of those who are both, including adopting communication styles that are more suitable for neurodiverse young people.

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- Improve the visibility of existing services via collaboration with LGBTIQ+ organisations and collectives who are often the first point of contact, as some young LGBTIQ+ people were unaware of available support or unsure whom to contact.
 - Ensure that most or all services are trans inclusive. Some services were not trans friendly, whereas others were.