ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES OF MISSING PERSONS

Main Authors
Cyril Piotrowicz (French Ministry of Interior)

March 2025

ENACT.
European Network Against
Crime and Terrorism

Report Information

This report was commissioned by the European Commission's Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs, and its community for a European Research and Innovation for Security (CERIS) workshop aimed at discussing Missing Persons that took place on March 19th, 2025.

About ENACT

ENACT is a knowledge network focused on the fight against crime and terrorism (FCT). The network is funded under the Horizon Europe Framework Programme in Cluster 3 – Civil Security for Society. The project addresses the call topic HORIZON-CL3-2022-SSRI-01-02 'Knowledge Networks for Security Research & Innovation', aiming to collect, aggregate, process, disseminate and make the most of the existing knowledge in the FCT area.

The project aims to satisfy two major ambitions,

- Provide evidence-based support to the decision-makers in the EU research and innovation (R&I) ecosystem in the FCT domain, targeted explicitly at enabling more effective and efficient programming of EU-funded R&I for the fight against crime and terrorism.

- Act as a catalyst for the uptake of innovation by enhancing the visibility and reliability of innovative FCT security solutions.

**Funded by
the European Union**

ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES OF MISSING PERSONS

Overview and challenges

Missing persons is an extremely complex issue: it encompasses both voluntary and involuntary disappearances, involving adults and children, nationals and migrants. Disappearances vary significantly in duration (ranging from a few hours to several years, sometimes becoming 'cold cases') and location (from local areas to international contexts). This is also a significant phenomenon across Europe. **In 2023, associations reported between 300,000 and 600,000 missing persons**, nearly half of whom were minors. Despite this, **only three European projects** primarily focus on the issue of missing persons (ChildRescue, Missing Migrants and Missing persons' families). Five additional European projects address the issue of missing persons through related topics such as human trafficking, migration, or child sexual exploitation.

At the European level, the EU Civil Security Taxonomy standardizes terminology by classifying security products and services across security areas and functional areas based on their capabilities. **When applied to the missing persons topic, several areas may be relevent either for security topic** (eg. child sexual abuse, digital forensics, online identity theft, conventional forensics, domestic/sexual abuse, counterfeit documents, trafficking of humans and goods, and radicalization) **and functional classifications** (F02 - Data, information & intelligence gathering, management, and exploitation, F03 - Monitoring and surveillance of environments and activities, F06 - Identification and authentication of persons, assets, and goods, and F10 - Investigation and forensics).

Since **none of these classifications primarily focus on missing persons**, cross-categorization is necessary to identify products and services that may be relevant to this issue but also to other security topics. This makes mapping trends particularly challenging, as it results in **166 product or service categories that may be useful for missing persons investigations**, complicating the extraction of precise insights.

Technology trends

In missing persons literature, technology is well-documented but primarily centered on investigations. The first area involves the identification of individuals through **traditional forensic techniques**, such as DNA-related technologies (including DNA analysis and kinship DNA analysis). The second area covers **digital forensics and intelligence-gathering techniques** used to investigate a missing person's past and current location (such as OSINT, GEOINT, HUMINT, and computer, phone, or internet data analysis). Additionally, the literature highlights how the creation of public and private, national and European biometric databases may serve as a valuable asset for investigations, enabling facial recognition, facial reconstruction, or AI-driven aging techniques. **By leveraging the EU Civil Security Taxonomy,** the ENACT Knowledge Base allowed us to identify additional technologies relevant to preventing or investigating missing persons cases, such as **UAVs, satellite imagery, or voice/speech recognition.**

For functions classified under the EU Taxonomy F02, F03, F06, and F10, ENACT has identified 899 organizations, indicating that solutions for investigating missing persons are available.

Stakeholders, policies and methodologies

From a quantitative perspective, the ecosystem of stakeholders involved in the investigation of missing persons is well-documented and appears relatively representative. It includes public and private actors at both national and international levels, as well as their interactions

However, **practitioners and policy reports focus mainly on the investigation phase**, emphasizing rapid reporting and response mechanisms, early warning systems (e.g., public awareness campaigns), and swift dissemination methods (e.g., Cell Broadcast, SMS, and TV), highlighting successful tools (eg. 116 000 hotlines, Interpol Yellow Notices, and child abduction alerts), and public-private initiatives (e.g., case file reanalysis and public calls for witnesses). **Yet, the prevention phase seems to remain overlooked.**

On the downside, **no comprehensive or participatory European mapping of relevant stakeholders has been identified**, nor has the existence of a European coordinating authority regarding missing persons. **ENACT Stakeholder Map has identified 327 organizations that hold skills in fighting organized crime and trafficking of humans and goods**, two FCT topics that are highly related to missing persons.

This latter point could help address most of the common issues reported, such as the lack of uniform reporting and tracking mechanisms (duplicate reports, better quantification of the phenomenon), risk of inconsistent classification, lack of shared terminology and risk assessment, and the absence of single points of contact. Furthermore, other challenges have been raised, including the need to develop prevention and investigation methods that ensure the safety of missing persons, as well as support mechanisms for families and victims (visa access, psychological assistance, and an 'absence certificate' for cases of disappearance).

Ethics, Legal and Social considerations

On the topic of investigating missing persons, the **Ethical, Legal, and Social (ELS) approach is well-documented**, **focusing mostly on children and migrants** such as Prum II, UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Lanzarote Convention, Istanbul Convention, or EU Directive 2011/93/EU, and the AI Act regarding the use of real-time remote biometric identification system.

While the European legal framework has been **extensively studied**, significant disparities seem to persist among Member States. A comparative law analysis may significantly enhance the understanding of missing persons cases and help address previously identified gaps (e.g., the definition of missing persons, the establishment of Single Points of Contact – SPOCs). Additionally, **issues related to specific cases** (voluntary disappearance of adults) **or global contexts** (armed conflicts, COVID) **have also been raised and may call of extra interest.**

> Overall, support from the European Commission could strengthen missing persons investigations by funding prevention studies, developing practical resources such as a European stakeholder map or national legal framework databases, or enhancing statistical tools and refining its taxonomy to better address this issue. However, this does not hinder the emergence of innovative local initiatives (cold-case calendars distributed in prisons to encourage tips, hackathon fostering police-citizen collaboration on cases, and university partnerships where students review unsolved cases) or more narrowed research project on related crimes (organized crime, trafficking of human being, child sexual exploitation).

Main Author
Cyril Piotrowicz (French Ministry of Interior)

March 2025

@enact-network

enact-eu.net