

**Submission
No 13**

**INQUIRY INTO UNSOLVED MURDERS AND LONG-TERM
MISSING PERSONS CASES IN NEW SOUTH WALES
BETWEEN 1965 AND 2010**

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1. Introduction

My name is Debbie Hollis. I am the sister of Ian Craig Hollis, who disappeared on 19 May 1986 from Minto, New South Wales. Ian was 16 years old at the time of his disappearance. He was a child.

I am making this submission as a family member of a long-term missing child to place on record the handling of my brother's case, the prolonged absence of investigation, and the lasting damage this has caused to my family over nearly four decades.

When Ian went missing, our family expected that the police would search for him, investigate his disappearance, and keep us informed. That did not happen. Instead, we were met with dismissal, silence, and inaction. The response we received at the time set the tone for the following years and ultimately shaped the devastating experience our family has lived with ever since.

This submission is intended to assist the Committee in understanding what happens when a missing child is not treated as a priority, when investigations are delayed for years, and when families are left to navigate loss, uncertainty, and risk without guidance or support. While this submission focuses on my brother's case, I believe our experience reflects broader systemic failures affecting many families of long-term missing persons across New South Wales.

2. Summary of Key Points

This submission raises the following key points for the Committee's consideration:

- Ian Craig Hollis disappeared in May 1986 at the age of 16, yet no formal or sustained police investigation commenced until 2002, sixteen years after he went missing. It was confirmed during the 2010 Coronial Inquest by both the Coroner and the detective in charge that, aside from a missing persons report made by Ian's mother at the time of his disappearance, there is no police paper trail or documented investigative activity prior to 2002.
- For the sixteen years following Ian's disappearance, there is no evidence of investigative activity, no documented searches, no meaningful follow-up, and no transparency provided to the family regarding what, if anything, was being done.
- At the time Ian went missing, his disappearance was dismissed as unremarkable due to his age, with comments made to his mother suggesting that teenagers go missing "all the time." This dismissal contributed directly to the absence of urgency and investigative action.

- The Hollis family was left to undertake our own searches and inquiries, without guidance, support, or safeguards, in a period before the internet, social media, or public education about missing persons existed.
 - Family members spent their own money, time, and emotional energy, and placed ourselves and our children into potentially unsafe situations because no other avenue for action was available to us.
 - When an investigation finally commenced years later, critical evidence had already been lost, witness memories had faded, and opportunities that only exist in the early stages of a disappearance were no longer recoverable.
 - A Coronial Inquest held in 2010 resulted in a declaration that Ian was deceased, but did not lead to renewed investigative activity, accountability for earlier inaction, or meaningful progress toward answers for our family.
 - Since the inquest, Ian's case has again remained largely dormant, with minimal transparency regarding its status and limited engagement with the family.
 - Recent attempts to move the case forward have been met with refusal by police to continue corresponding with our family's advocate, reinforcing a pattern of disengagement and silence.
 - The cumulative effect of these failures has caused profound and lasting harm, including generational trauma, with younger family members now involved in seeking answers decades after Ian's disappearance.
 - This submission highlights the need for systemic reform, including improved accountability, transparency, timely investigative standards, and access to independent, regulated third-party support for families when police avenues are exhausted, stalled, or withdrawn.
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3. Responding to the Terms of Reference

My brother's disappearance and the way it was handled demonstrate many of the systemic issues this inquiry is examining. What happened to Ian's case was not the result of one mistake or one missed opportunity, but a prolonged failure to act, followed by years of silence and disengagement.

3.1 Police response to the disappearance of a child

When Ian disappeared in 1986, he was 16 years old. Despite this, his disappearance was not treated as urgent. My mother was told words to the effect that "sixteen-year-olds go missing all the time." That response shaped everything that followed.

There was no immediate sense that Ian needed to be found, no urgency attached to his disappearance, and no sustained effort to establish what had happened to him. At the 2010

Coronial Inquest, it was confirmed by both the Coroner and the detective in charge that, aside from the initial missing persons report made by my mother, there is no police paper trail or documented investigative activity prior to 2002.

For sixteen years, there were no recorded searches, no follow-up inquiries, no apparent witness canvassing, and no meaningful investigative steps taken. This was not a case where police investigated and exhausted all leads. It was a case where investigation largely did not occur at all.

By the time police action finally commenced in 2002, the case had already been severely compromised by the passage of time.

3.2 The consequences of delay and inactivity

Time is critical in missing persons cases, particularly when a child is involved. In Ian's case, the early period when evidence could have been collected and memories were fresh was lost entirely.

As a result of the delay:

- Witnesses' memories faded or were lost altogether
- People who may have known something moved away or passed on
- Physical locations relevant to Ian's disappearance changed over time
- Opportunities that only exist in the immediate aftermath of a disappearance were permanently lost

Ian's case did not become "cold" because it was thoroughly investigated. It became cold because it was allowed to sit untouched for years. The lack of early action created a situation where meaningful investigation later became increasingly difficult, if not impossible.

3.3 Ongoing lack of transparency and engagement

Throughout the years following Ian's disappearance, our family was given little to no information about what was happening with his case. In reality, there was nothing to report, because nothing was being done.

Even after the Coronial Inquest in 2010, there was no renewed investigative momentum and no clear communication about what, if anything, would happen next. The inquest resulted in a declaration that Ian was deceased, but it did not lead to accountability for the years of inaction or to renewed efforts to find answers.

More recently, attempts to progress Ian's case have been met with further disengagement. We have been told that police will no longer correspond with our family's advocate. This has effectively shut down one of the only remaining avenues for communication and has reinforced the long-standing pattern of silence we have experienced since 1986.

For families like mine, this lack of transparency and refusal to engage is deeply damaging. It leaves us without answers, without confidence in the system, and without any clear pathway forward.

4. Personal Experience

After Ian went missing, our family was left to navigate the situation largely on our own. There was no clear direction from police, no guidance about what to do next, and no support offered to help us understand the risks we were taking or how to search safely.

This was a time before the internet, before social media, and before any real public education about missing persons. We did not have access to information, resources, or professional advice. Despite this, we felt we had no choice but to act, because it was clear that if we did not keep looking for Ian, no one else would.

As a family, we followed leads ourselves. We made enquiries, went to places connected to Ian's last known movements, and pursued information without knowing whether it was safe to do so. We spent our own money and used our own time, often while trying to maintain some sense of normal life and stability for our children.

At times, we brought younger family members with us because there was no alternative. Looking back, it is deeply troubling to reflect on the situations we placed ourselves in, not understanding the risks and having no protection or professional oversight. Families should never be forced into this position, particularly when searching for a missing child.

The emotional toll of this experience has been ongoing and overwhelming. Living with uncertainty, unanswered questions, and the constant hope that Ian might be found has shaped my entire adult life. The absence of answers meant there was no point at which grief could be processed or resolved. Instead, it became a constant presence.

I also wish to note that I now live with a significant health impairment as a result of strokes. While I do not attribute this condition to Ian's disappearance, I have been advised that ongoing stress can place my health at risk of further deterioration. As a result, my capacity to continue actively pursuing the search for my brother in the way I once did is now limited.

This reality is deeply distressing. The responsibility for seeking answers about what happened to Ian has not diminished, but my ability to carry that responsibility has changed. What should never have rested on the shoulders of family members alone has now become even harder to bear.

Despite this, the search for answers has not ended. Instead, it has expanded to involve other members of my family. My daughter-in-law has become actively involved in trying to progress Ian's case, assisting with enquiries and supporting efforts to obtain information. In addition, my

granddaughter, who is 21 years old, is now involved in seeking answers about a man who disappeared before she was born.

The fact that multiple generations of our family are now involved in this search demonstrates the lasting impact of long-term inaction. The burden of finding out what happened to Ian has been passed down, not because we wanted it to be, but because the system failed to act when it should have.

The experience of searching for a missing loved one without institutional support is isolating, frightening, and exhausting. It is not something families should ever be expected to endure alone. What my family experienced was not just the loss of Ian, but the loss of safety, certainty, and the ability to live without constant fear and unanswered questions.

5. Identified Gaps, Challenges, and Systemic Issues

My family's experience highlights several systemic gaps and failures in the handling of long-term missing persons cases, particularly those involving children.

One of the most significant failures is the absence of timely investigative action. In Ian's case, there was no sustained police investigation for sixteen years. This delay was not caused by investigative complexity or the exhaustion of leads, but by inaction. When early investigative opportunities are missed, they cannot be recreated, and the long-term viability of a case is severely compromised.

Closely connected to this is the lack of accountability for prolonged periods of inactivity. Even where no investigation is taking place, there appears to be no clear mechanism requiring review, explanation, or escalation. In our case, there has never been a satisfactory explanation for why Ian's disappearance was not properly investigated in the years following 1986, nor has anyone been held accountable for that failure.

A further and deeply troubling issue is the lack of transparency afforded to families. When families attempt to seek information through formal channels, including Government Information (Public Access) requests, they are often met with a standard response that the matter is an "open investigation" and that releasing information may prejudice future inquiries. In cases such as my brother's, this position is profoundly unfair.

Ian's disappearance is a historical matter. There has been no active investigation for extended periods of time. To deny families access to information on the basis that disclosure might prejudice an investigation that is not, in practical terms, occurring creates an imbalance of power and leaves families completely in the dark.

There is currently no independent oversight governing how and when information is withheld from families in these circumstances. Police are able to rely on broad claims of potential prejudice, while families are given no meaningful way to challenge those claims or to obtain basic factual information about what has or has not been done. This lack of transparency compounds trauma and erodes trust in the system.

Another systemic failure is what I can only describe as an institutional loop between police and the Coroner. Families are often told by police that matters fall within the Coroner's jurisdiction, while the Coroner's office refers families back to police for further action. In practice, this results in responsibility being passed back and forth, with no agency taking ownership of progressing the case.

In Ian's case, the Coronial Inquest in 2010 resulted in a declaration that he was deceased, but it did not lead to renewed investigative action. Following the inquest, there was no clear pathway for the case to move forward. Police were able to rely on the inquest having occurred, while the Coroner's role had effectively concluded. The result was further stagnation.

This lack of clarity about responsibility creates a situation where cases can remain dormant indefinitely. Families are left without answers, without recourse, and without any clear authority responsible for taking the next step.

Taken together, these issues demonstrate a system in which families are expected to accept silence and inaction, while being denied access to information that might allow them to advocate for their loved ones. Without transparency, accountability, and clear lines of responsibility, long-term missing persons cases are at risk of being quietly abandoned.

6. Recommendations

Based on my family's experience, I respectfully ask the Committee to consider the following matters as part of its examination of long-term missing persons cases.

There should be a clearer and more consistent approach to the review of dormant long-term missing persons cases, particularly those involving children. Where cases have remained inactive for extended periods, there should be a structured process for reassessment to determine whether further investigative steps are possible.

Consideration should be given to the establishment of a dedicated capability or unit with responsibility for long-term missing persons cases that have become dormant. Such a unit could focus on reviewing historical cases, identifying missed opportunities, and ensuring that long-term cases are not left without attention simply because time has passed.

Greater transparency for families would also be of significant benefit. Families should be able to understand, at a basic level, what investigative activity has occurred, what has not, and why. Where information cannot be released, clear and consistent explanations should be provided, particularly in historical cases where no active investigation is underway.

The Committee may also wish to consider how independent, regulated third-party assistance could support families when police avenues are limited or have been exhausted. Organisations with specialist skills, such as trained search and detection services, may be able to assist in progressing cases in a way that complements police work rather than replaces it.

Importantly, families should not be left in a position where they feel they must investigate alone or place themselves at risk in order to seek answers. Independent assistance, operating within appropriate legal and ethical frameworks, could provide families with support and options that currently do not exist.

Finally, I ask the Committee to recognise the long-term impact on families when missing persons cases are left unresolved for decades. Even when cases are historical, the need for answers does not diminish, and continued engagement can make a meaningful difference to families who have lived with uncertainty for most of their lives.

7. Conclusion

My brother Ian was a child when he disappeared. He was sixteen years old, and he mattered. What happened to him, and what did not happen in the years that followed, has shaped my family's life for nearly four decades.

This submission is not made in anger. It is made out of a need for understanding, transparency, and progress. Our family does not expect the past to be undone, but we do hope that lessons can be learned so that other families are not left in the same position we were — searching alone, without support, information, or accountability.

I believe that with the right focus, long-term missing persons cases like Ian's can still be examined meaningfully, whether through renewed investigation, independent assistance, or specialist review of dormant cases. Even small steps toward transparency and engagement can make an enormous difference to families who have lived for years without answers.

I thank the Committee for taking the time to examine these issues and for providing families like mine with an opportunity to be heard. My hope is that this inquiry leads to practical changes that ensure missing persons cases are not left to fade into silence, and that families are never again left to carry this burden alone.

8. Permissions and Confidentiality

I consent to this submission being published with my name.

9. Signature

Debbie Hollis
17/01/2026