

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

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Submission to the NSW Parliament – Inquiry into Unsolved Murders and Long-Term Missing Persons Cases in New South Wales (1965–2010)

Portfolio Committee No. 1 – Premier and Finance

Submitted by:

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I make this submission as an individual researcher, with the support of the School of Nursing Midwifery and Social Sciences, CQ University, where I am a research focused Professor in the College of Social Work.

This submission is made in the context of growing public concern regarding the handling of long-term missing persons cases in NSW, including a 2025 petition led by Paul Toole MP that attracted more than 10,000 signatures and called for a parliamentary inquiry into NSW Police investigations of long-term missing persons. Families who supported this petition have consistently described feeling “abandoned” by existing processes and have advocated for improved oversight,

better forensic and investigative responses, enhanced family support, and the possible creation of an independent task force to review cold cases.

I have significant social work frontline and academic research experience including working with victim survivors when a person is missing, my experience of service delivery deficits confirm that lack of support adversely impacts families and supporters of long-term missing persons.

This submission foregrounds the absence of coordinated, well-funded research and support systems, and the resultant harm for people “left behind” when loved ones go missing—particularly in cases with delayed investigation or disproportionate or lacking responses are provided (Wayland, 2015, 2020). My research identifies that failing to provide procedural and psychosocial supports to families of missing people constitutes a public health issue that places additional strain on the health system in response to trauma experienced by families (Gambier-Ross, Apps, & Wayland, 2022). I want to highlight that Police are *not* psychological support providers however Police are identified in Australian and international research as *unintentional support providers* for families of missing people, especially in the absence of bespoke, specialised or funded support services. (Ward & Wayland, 2022)

2. Missing Persons in NSW – Shifting the Lens from Crime to Health and Social Impact

Current practice in NSW, as across Australia, situates missing persons primarily within police investigative frameworks, with an emphasis on converting a case from “lost” to “found.” However, when cases become “long-term”—previously defined in NSW as longer than six months and now redefined as longer than three months—there is a pressing need to attend to the broader health, social, and community support ecosystems surrounding loved ones alongside investigative processes, particularly when cases go cold (Bricknell & AIC 2017). While research and therapeutic learning have improved understanding of how to best deliver care to families, these efforts are undermined by persistent gaps in funding for research on the incidence and impact of missing persons (limiting a prevention lens to reduce how many people go missing and the risks that elevate a disappearance), as well as the long-term social, emotional, financial, and

trauma impacts on families and communities given there are fragmented support options.

I caution that public perceptions of missing people are often shaped by narrow assumptions focused on crime, media visibility, and sensational cases, rather than recognition of the full continuum of disappearance - from unintentional or health-related cases to those intersecting with mental distress or social isolation. Without investment in both prevention (reducing risk of disappearance) and postvention (supporting those left behind), opportunities to reduce missing persons rates and mitigate harm will remain limited. However, this focus does not assist those families currently living with unending losses. (Wayland, 2025)

In the early 2000s, the NSW Attorney General's Department established the Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit (FFMPU) in response to advocacy by families of missing people. I was the first permanent counsellor in this service in 2004, and, alongside Ms. Leonie Jacques, we both undertook a Churchill Fellowship (2000 and 2006) to learn from international best practice in police-family liaison and therapeutic support. The service provided counselling, advocacy, and mediation between families and police, including support during investigative updates, training to Police recruits, policy and legislative change and support during coronial processes.

Despite this history, the current Families and Friends of Missing Persons Service (within NSW Communities and Justice, noting a name change from unit to service) now runs at amended capacity, with previously funded roles not filled and resources diverted to the Victims of Crime Counselling Scheme. Despite the NSW Victims' Rights and Support Act 2013 identifying that the service '*provides tailored support, including legal advice and counselling, for families of missing persons*'. This has removed dedicated advocacy and case coordination for families of long-term missing persons and weakened crucial liaison between police and families. At present families are now offered up to 22 hours of counselling with an external provider, however international literature notes that therapeutic support is not standalone best practice; advocacy and liaison are integral to enhancing the quality of life for people left behind.

3. Impacts on Families and Supporters — Ambiguous Loss and Chronic Harm

My collaborative research with colleagues in the UK and US highlights that the concept of ambiguous loss – is an unresolved form of grief that is profoundly destabilising for families of missing persons. Ambiguous loss leads to chronic psychological stress, prolonged uncertainty, and social isolation, as families live with not knowing the fate of their loved one. (Smid et al, 2017). Despite clear evidence of these harms, there is no national strategy or sustained funding dedicated to:

- (a) longitudinal research on psychosocial impacts of being impacted by someone missing.
- (b) evaluation of response models (noting the absence of an agreed best-practice framework for supporting families long term with emphasis on social, legal, financial and practical needs); or
- (c) integrated systems of care bridging law enforcement, health, and community services to offer wraparound, throughcare to people living with an ambiguous loss.

4. Research & Funding Deficits in Policy and Practice

Australia's research landscape on missing persons remains constrained by inconsistent data, fragmented record-keeping, and a lack of rigorous longitudinal studies. While valuable historical contributions exist, they are not matched by contemporary, NSW-specific investment in research or evaluation. Critically, the voices of families of long-term missing persons remain largely absent from policy and research processes. They may have capacity to facilitate their own media opportunities, engage in long form podcast opportunities however voices are often only included when media decide a case is 'shareworthy'. (Slakoff & Fradella, 2019)

Integrated data systems linking police, health, welfare, and community services do not currently exist in a systematic way. As a result, policymakers and

practitioners lack high-quality evidence on effective interventions and systemic factors shaping family wellbeing over time.

5. Disproportionate Responses & Systemic Inequities

High-profile cases in NSW often attract sustained media attention, specialist resources, and renewed investigative focus, sometimes decades later. By contrast, families whose cases receive limited public attention frequently report reduced investigative priority and ongoing distress.

My current work with Mindframe, as part of Everymind with NSW Health, examines how media and institutional biases, including “missing white woman syndrome,” shape whose stories are amplified and whose are marginalised. There are currently no dedicated media reporting guidelines to promote equity and inclusion in missing persons coverage, leading to uneven public visibility and support for families.

Recommendations

- a) Investment in a Strategic Research Agenda aimed at preventing historical harms, improving police–family communication, and strengthening evidence-based practice.
- b) Development of Integrated Data Systems capturing all missing persons cases, outcomes, and linkages across homicide, suicide, and misadventure monitoring programs.
- c) Sustainable Funding for Specialist Support Services, recognising the vital role of organisations such as Missed Foundation, which currently operates without core funding and based in Victoria.
- d) Establishment of an Independent Cold Case Review Mechanism or Taskforce to enhance oversight, accountability, and forensic capacity in long-term cases underpinned by a trauma-informed, family liaison approach to reduce repetitive exposure to distressing information.
- e) Development of Safe and Equitable Media Reporting Guidelines for missing persons cases.

The NSW Government's inquiry, alongside strong community advocacy reflected in the 2025 petition, presents a critical opportunity to address long-standing gaps in investigation, research, funding, and family support. Reforms must be evidence-informed, equitable, and trauma-responsive to honour the lived experiences of families affected by long-term missing persons cases.

Professor Sarah Wayland

10/02/2026

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