

# Dementia carers reassured they can – and should – call police about wandering patients

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Only a small proportion of cases of a person with dementia going

missing are reported to police, according to a new study.

Most [family carers](#) – the wives, husbands and the children of those with [dementia](#) – would rather not call the [police](#), even though the risks posed to the person with the disease can be high, including death.

Their reasons included not wanting to waste police time and being embarrassed at having 'lost' the person with dementia.

An estimated 850,000 people in the UK have dementia, with most expected to go missing at least once.

Most are found safe, though the risks to them can be extremely high, due to their vulnerability.

The research, led by expert in missing people, Dr. Karen Shalev Greene, at the University of Portsmouth, is published in *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice*.

Dr. Shalev Greene said: "Although this was a small-scale study, this and previous research leads us to believe the majority of people with dementia who go missing are never reported to the police.

"It's shocking that some carers worry they'll be in trouble if they call the police for help when a relative goes missing. Perhaps the police could do more to reassure carers the police are the right people to turn to when a relative with dementia goes missing, and they're not wasting anyone's time."

The study calls on a wide range of agencies, including GPs and social services, to help carers prevent a person with dementia from going missing. Tactics suggested include door alarms at one extreme, to helping the person with the disease continue to follow a hobby,

preventing them from becoming bored.

And, finally, the researchers call for better training of police officers to help them work with carers and communities.

Dr. Shalev Greene suggests this could be achieved through the adoption of the Herbert Protocol, a scheme named after a WWII veteran George Herbert, which involves [police forces](#) collecting information on those with dementia before they go missing, such as having a mobile telephone number and a photograph.

The study examined the actions, thoughts and fears of family members looking after a relative with dementia.

The 12 carers interviewed lived in Hertfordshire, London, Merseyside, Norfolk, North Lancashire, Nottinghamshire and Surrey.

Between them, they'd had 52 incidents of their family member with dementia going missing. Only 10 of those incidents had been reported to the police.

There were four reasons carers wouldn't call the police, including mistrust of the police; fear how the person with dementia would react to being the subject of a police search; being embarrassed; and not wanting to waste police time.

One carer, who looks after her mother with dementia, said: "If she (was found) upstairs at a neighbour's, for instance, and suddenly she comes downstairs and there's sort of, you know, half the police force there, she wouldn't be happy."

She added that her mother was fearful if the police was involved, she would be 'carted off' to a care home.

The study also examined what factors made it most likely a carer would call the police, when a relative with dementia went missing.

The three reasons were: Wanting to protect the relative from harm; thinking the police could advise on how to conduct a successful search; and expecting the police to be better at searching.

One carer, a husband looking after his wife, said: "I got to the point where I didn't know what to do, and so ringing them for advice, what do I do now?"

Another, discussing why she was reluctant to call the police if her husband went missing, said: "I'm just anxious that he can't communicate and he might find it quite scary... it would be nice to build a relationship with the police locally...so if I said to somebody, here's a picture of my husband, this is him, so that if they're aware and see somebody acting strangely, they don't automatically jump on them, handcuff them or Taser them or whatever else they might do."

The suggestion of carers and [police officers](#) working together was also discussed in the study, though recognised as likely to be workable only in smaller communities.

Provided by University of Portsmouth

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