



# Foreign & Commonwealth Office

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Our reference: FOI 0900-10/CONS 81-10

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Ms Laura Richards

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*Dear Ms Richards,*

## **REQUEST FOR INFORMATION UNDER THE FREEDOM OF ACT 2000: REF 0900-10**

Thank you for your e-mail of 10 October to the Information Rights Team in which you requested, under the Freedom of Information Act 2000, the following information about missing persons investigations on British nationals abroad:

- "1. What are the statistics for UK National Missing persons abroad over the last five years?*
- 2. How many of those missing persons are under the age of 16?*
- 3. How many UK National Missing persons Investigations have been unsuccessful over the last five years?*
- 4. How many of the missing persons over the last 5 years were 'lost' persons?*
- 5. How many of the missing persons over the last 5 years went missing voluntarily?*
- 6. How many of the missing persons over the last 5 years went missing under the influence of a third party?"*

I can confirm that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) holds information relevant to your request.

Please see the attached table which shows data on missing persons cases which were reported to the FCO in the last 5 years by financial year. The data has been taken from COMPASS, our assistance database, and includes all cases that were recorded by consular officers where reporting a missing person was the main or secondary reason the caller sought consular assistance. Please note that the figures reflect the number of services, i.e. the number of cases files opened in that year. Each service recorded may, therefore, represent more than one individual.

The definition of a missing person for FCO consular assistance purposes differs from that used for other official purposes e.g. UK police. In addition to those individuals who have been missing for a long period of time, the category of missing persons in our database could also include individuals who are temporarily unaccounted for during, for example, the

initial phase of a crisis like a terrorist attack or natural disaster. In these situations, the FCO receives a large number of enquiries from friends or relatives who have been unable to contact individuals believed to be in the crisis area. Such cases are also recorded as missing person cases, even though the individuals are not technically missing.

We are unable to tell you how many missing persons investigations have been unsuccessful, i.e. in how many of the cases the person remains unaccounted for, since our database may not, in every case, contain information on whether an individual has been found or confirmed deceased. We could check on the number of such missing person cases that have been marked as closed in the database. However, a closed case does not necessarily indicate that the person has been found, only that the file has been marked as requiring no further consular action. Any data we could extract on closed cases is not, therefore, an accurate reflection of the total number of missing person cases that remain unaccounted for.

Our consular records contain specific details on missing person cases, such as the age of the person and the circumstances in which they disappeared. These are held on individual COMPASS files; however, this data cannot be extracted without referring to the details on each case file. This would involve checking each individual missing person case file held for the period for which you requested the information. We cannot, therefore, readily provide from our records the information that you have requested about the number of missing persons under the age of 16 or those who went missing 'voluntarily'. We believe that the time needed to extract this information would exceed the cost limit under Section 12 of the FOIA.

As you may be aware, the FCO is not obliged to comply with requests for information where the cost of dealing with them would be likely to exceed 'an appropriate limit'. Section 12 of the FOIA allows public authorities to refuse requests for information where the cost of dealing with them would exceed the appropriate limit. The limit has been specified in the Freedom of Information and Data Protection (Appropriate Limit and Fees) Regulations 2004. For central government, the appropriate limit is set at £600. This figure represents the estimated cost of one or more persons spending 3½ working days in determining whether the government department concerned holds the information, and to find, retrieve and extract the relevant material.

You may consider requesting the information you are interested in for certain countries and/or a shorter period. This may enable us to conduct a search of relevant Compass case files to extract the information you have requested. We would like to be as helpful as possible and would be happy to conduct a new search. There is, however, no guarantee of disclosure or that it would yield any useful information, as any new request must be considered under the Act.

For question 4 of your request, it would be most helpful if you could clarify what you mean by 'lost persons'. In question 6 you ask about the number of British nationals who went 'missing' under the influence of a third party. However, it is not clear whether you are referring here to cases involving an abduction of British nationals, for example. We hold separate data on forced marriage, abduction and child abduction cases so it would be helpful to know if you are also interested in this information.

In keeping with the spirit and effect of the FOIA, all information is assumed to be releasable to the public unless it is exempt. The information we have supplied to you may now be published on our website together with any related information that will provide a key to its wider context.

I hope you are satisfied with this reply. If you have any queries about this letter, or are unhappy with the service you have received in relation to your request and you wish to make a complaint or if you would like a review of our decision, please write to the Information

Rights Team at The Old Admiralty Building, Room SG 120, London, SW1A 2PA. E-mail: [dp-foi.img@fco.gov.uk](mailto:dp-foi.img@fco.gov.uk). Please remember to quote the reference number above in any future communications. You have 40 working days to do so from the date of this letter.

If you are not content with the outcome of the internal review, you have the right to apply directly to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) for a decision. Generally, the ICO cannot make a decision unless you have exhausted the complaints procedure provided by the FCO. The ICO can be contacted at The Information Commissioner's Office, Wycliffe House, Water Lane, Wilmslow, Cheshire SK9 5AF.

We continually strive to improve our service, so we would welcome your feedback and comments. If you would like to provide feedback, please email our Information Rights Team at: [dp-foi.img@fco.gov.uk](mailto:dp-foi.img@fco.gov.uk).

You can also find out more about the FCO and freedom of information issues at our Access to Information website: <http://foi.fco.gov.uk/en>

*Yours sincerely,*

*Louise Edwards*

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Strategy, Communications and Training Group