

DETROIT

Detroit sees surge in missing person reports in 2024

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Detroit has seen a surge of missing persons reports this year — hundreds more than in recent years — and police say the increase is tied to a rise in "runaways who voluntarily leave home."

More than 3,100 reports of missing people have been made to the Detroit Police Department so far this year — an 18% increase over 2023, as of Dec. 13, according to police data. Many have involved people who are vulnerable: elderly residents with dementia, people living with mental health issues and teenagers who left their homes without permission.

People have been recovered in more than 2,900 of this year's reported missing cases, police said. But for children and teens, even a short time away could expose them to dangers.

"One child missing is enough," Darryl Woods, chair of the Detroit Board of Police Commissioners, said. "And we need to continue to ramp up our efforts and find ways to make sure that children are in safe places."

Detroit Police Commissioner Ricardo Moore told the Free Press that the increase in missing persons reports "should really be alarming." Last year, he requested information about missing persons cases from the department because of concerns from a community activist about the number of cases in the news.

As of Dec. 13, according to police, there had been 3,103 missing persons reports made so far this year. That's up from 2,629 missing person reports made last year; 2,583 made in 2022, and 2,338 made in 2021, according to data from the department.

In a statement to the Free Press, the Detroit Police Department said it "has seen an increase in missing persons reported over the last few years. While there is an increase, a driving factor is an increase in the number of runaways who voluntarily leave home."

The department, on its Facebook page for missing persons cases, defines runaways as "youth who have left home without parental/caregiver permission." About 41% of people actively missing in the city as of Dec. 13 were classified by Detroit police as runaways, according to data posted on the page.

"Thankfully, the number of recovered missing persons continues to increase as well," the department said in its statement, adding that people have been recovered in 2,919 of this year's missing persons cases, as of Dec. 13. "The Department continues to actively work to bring missing Detroiters home."

Detroit Police Sgt. Shannon Jones, with the department's missing persons unit, said she has noticed younger kids running away and staying out overnight. "Every year it gets younger, I tend to notice," Jones told the Free Press during an interview this fall.

Angeline Hartmann, director of communications for the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children said children who leave home can be at risk for a variety of possible dangers, including homelessness, selling or using drugs, being targeted by sex traffickers or becoming involved in criminal activity.

"They definitely are pressured out there to survive," she said.

It's unclear how Detroit's increase this year compares with national trends. According to statistics from the National Crime Information Center, there was a 3% increase in the number of missing persons records in the U.S. between 2022 and 2023.

About two dozen of Detroit's missing persons cases this year ended when police determined people had died. That includes the case of long-missing teen Na'Ziyah Harris, who vanished in January at age 13. Her disappearance was first reported to Detroit Public Schools Community District Department of Public Safety, but Detroit police took over the case in February.

The teen's body has not been found and a 42-year-old Detroit man, who has children with Na'Ziyah's aunt, has been charged with murder and sexual assault charges in the case.

"I strongly believe that it is a community issue when our young people come missing in the city of Detroit," Woods said, "that we have to stay vigilant and that we have to continue to roll up our sleeves to be able to protect our children."

Most missing cases promoted by police involved youths

To get the public's help to find missing people, Detroit police post information on social media and send email notifications to media outlets about some cases. The alerts include photos and basic information, like names, ages, race and gender, as well as details about when and where people were last seen.

The same information is often posted on DPD's Facebook page for missing persons.

Not every case gets an emailed alert. Since the beginning of the year, the Free Press has received alerts about more than 400 missing people from DPD. A handful concerned people last seen in 2023. Often, the department also sends alerts when people are recovered.

To report on and better understand Detroit's missing persons cases, the Free Press undertook a monthslong effort to collect and analyze the alerts. The Free Press also asked DPD for details about every person reported missing this year, but the department declined to provide that information. The newspaper filed a Freedom of Information Act request on Wednesday for those details.

Among 438 cases reviewed by the Free Press:

The majority — about 60% — concerned missing youths.

The youngest person was a 1-year-old and the oldest was an 87-year-old man; both have been found.

Most of those who went missing — 91% — are Black.

The cases were evenly divided by gender, with 52% females and 48% males.

Mental health issues or dementia were listed in roughly one out of three cases.

Jones said community assistance is a big factor when someone is reported missing.

"We're more successful when we get more information," Jones said. She stressed the importance of parents knowing who their children are hanging out with and where.

"Checking up on your kids and knowing about your community and when you see kids wandering the street or going around and getting in cars that they shouldn't be getting into — being on that type of alert," Jones said.

Police confirmed that, among the missing people who have been recovered, 25 were determined to be dead. As of late October, according to police, five of those cases were homicides, including Na'Ziyah Harris, who went missing Jan. 9.

Tamara Liberty Smith, vice chair of the Detroit Board of Police Commissioners, said "we do not have an epidemic of missing persons." She said many youths reported missing left home without permission, but they often continue to use social media while gone and someone knows where they are, then they eventually return home.

In Na'Ziyah's case, Smith said: "There was no sign or evidence of any life. There was no social media presence. There was no chatter from her friends saying they had spoken with her. No family members have seen her."

Family waits years for answers: 'It's just like the time has stopped'

Though most missing person cases in Detroit are resolved — as is the case for 94% of this year's cases so far, according to police data — some have lingered for years, leaving families with few answers as to what happened to their loved ones.

That's true for the family of Alasia Hill, who vanished in 2021 at age 23.

"I've had dreams of talking to Alasia, trying to figure out where she was and, you know, it's just like the time has stopped," said Shyaira Fikes, Hill's oldest sister.

Charisma Carucci, Hill's mother, last saw her daughter on March 10, 2021. She said her daughter, who had recently had her hand amputated at Henry Ford Hospital, had stitches taken out that day in March 2021 and then went to a home she was staying at not far from the hospital. Carucci said she spoke to her daughter by phone that evening, but when she called to check on her the next day, Hill had vanished.

Detroit police said this month that Hill is still missing and her case is under investigation.

Carucci described coping with her daughter's disappearance as like a battle within.

"Sometimes I feel like, am I giving up hope to come to a place of acceptance that we may not get an answer?" Carucci said. "Am I being naive to believe that she's, you know, just out there and doesn't know how to get in touch with us or she can't?"

Fikes described Hill, a mother of two, as a powerful and strong person.

"Her personality was amazing," she said. "If you had Alasia as your friend, you had Alasia as your friend forever."

Every year, Fikes said, a photo of her, her son and Hill — the last she took with her sister — pops up on her phone. Seeing it hurts, she said.

“It’s like time ticking,” Fikes said. “In my mind, it’s like you hear a clock just tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick. And it’s like, I need it to just be solved, something to come out, someone to say something. Something. I need something.”

Anyone with information about a missing person case is asked to contact their local police precinct or Crime Stoppers of Michigan at 800-SPEAK-UP.

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